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Lin, Jenny

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Dispelling "Made in Italy vs. China" Myths in Contemporary Art and Fashion

Jenny Lin

Introduction: A Question of Quality

On a winter's day in 2025, I went shopping for a scarf in central Rome. Upon entering a small store, the salesman showed me several scarves, exclaiming, "Queste sciarpe sono di alta qualità, tutte fatte in Italia! Purtroppo, questi giorni molte sono fatte in Cina!" (These scarves are high quality, all made in Italy! Unfortunately, these days many are made in China!) The vendor aimed to emphasize the high value of his store's scarves by contrasting them against those made in China, presuming I would appreciate the difference. I wondered if he would have offered this commentary had he detected I was half Chinese and considered debating his position. I'd spent the past several months based at the American Academy in Rome researching Chinese and Italian art and fashion relations. In the Fendi archive, I examined collaboratively made handbags integrating exquisite craftsmanship by highly skilled Chinese artisans. In Prato, I saw dozens of Chinese-owned workshops and retailers, primarily staffed with migrant workers producing and selling Made in Italy apparel. For over a decade, I had been reading about the high numbers of Chinese immigrants working in the Italian textile industry and hearing rumors of garments made almost entirely in China and then shipped to Italy for the final button and Made in Italy label. Considering current globalized manufacturing practices, would a scarf labeled Made in Italy necessarily be superior to one made in China? I bit my tongue and bought a scarf, satisfied with its quality and style despite my ambivalence regarding the sales pitch.

Since their respective twentieth century economic booms, post-1960s Italy and post-1980s China have been respectively romanticized and demonized for distinctive cultural output and manufacturing prowess. Within the Western imagination, Made in Italy has come to connote classical elegance, high-quality artisanal craftsmanship, and luxurious originals. In recent years, Italian officials have promoted Made in Italy goods with renewed vigor, signaled by the renaming of the Ministry of Economic Development to the Ministry of Business and Made in Italy.[1] At the 2023 Salone del Mobile in Milan, Italy's largest Furniture Fair, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni delivered a speech stating that the Made in Italy brand is "the most precious thing we have, provided we are able to defend and enhance it."[2] A Made in Italy bill passed in 2023 designated April 15 as Made in Italy day and established a Made in Italy high school and curriculum. Simultaneously, the government applied for and successfully received United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Intangible Cultural Heritage status for Italian cuisine, the first such designation honoring an entire national cuisine.[3]

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[1] "From Ecological Transition to Energy Security. Meloni's rebranding, explained," *Decode39*, October 24, 2022, https://decode39.com/4667/pichetto-fratin-italy-energy-security-ecological-transition-cingolani.

[2] "Giorgia Meloni unveils plan to defend Made in Italy Brand," *Wanted in Milan*, April 18, 2023, https://www.wantedinmilan.com/news/giorgia-meloni-unveils-plan-to-defend-made-in-italy-brand.html. See also "The Made in Italy Framework Law," Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy, Governo Italiano website, https://www.mimit.gov.it/en/made-in-italy-en/framework-law, accessed January 25, 2026.

[3] "Made in Italy: here are the measures of the bill definitively approved by the Senate," *NOVA.news* December 23,

By contrast, the Made in China label, even though China has its own vast and rich history of art, craft, and culinary traditions, tends to conjure fleeting fast fashion, low quality mass production, and cheap knockoffs.[4] This article complicates these vastly oversimplified categorizations of Made in Italy and Made in China by highlighting transnational production modes and creative endeavors that bridge Italian and Chinese cultures while dispelling pernicious stereotypes and myths of national purity. I present media and scholarly coverage of the phenomenon of Made in Italy fashion produced by Chinese and other migrant workers in industrial Italian cities like Prato, a major garment-manufacturing center. Furthermore, I highlight collaborations between Italian fashion houses and contemporary Chinese artists and artisans that undermine the presumed superiority of Made in Italy over Made in China. The article foregrounds artistic and curatorial projects that help foster intercultural understanding, especially between Chinese and Italian communities.

From fall 2024 to summer 2025, I traveled between Rome, Prato, Bologna, and Milan, meeting with artists, designers, and curators—some Italian, some part Chinese like myself, some born in China but trained and based in Italy—all dedicated to enhancing intercultural understanding and undoing essentializing stereotypes associated with Italian and Chinese craftsmanship and manufacturing; snippets from our conversations and encounters appear throughout this article. These figures further blur the already fuzzy lines between art and fashion. Working across sculptural installation, video, textile art, conceptual fashion design, and social practice, artists and designers including Bologna-based Zheng Ningyuan, Prato-based Leone Contini, and Rome-based Yuejie Ding craft projects that debunk false binaries of Made in Italy vs. Made in China, and also of Art vs. fashion, wherein the former (Made in Italy; Art with a capital A) have been positioned as superior and connoting uniqueness, excellent quality, and craftsmanship, and the latter (especially in the case of fast fashion made in China) perceived as inferior and often connoting imitation, poor quality, and low-skilled labor. Art and fashion hold unique characteristics, chief among them being that art need not be functional. Then again, many high fashion garments might also be characterized as lacking everyday functionality, existing more as rarefied wearable sculptures. Fashion, as an industry encompassing both high-end haute couture and low-end ready-to-wear, exists as a for-profit system rooted in systemic inequalities. Fair collaborations are difficult in a field dominated by global capitalism. Simultaneously, art, although frequently romanticized as a lofty individual endeavor, cannot escape the market, as seen in commercial galleries, auction houses, corporate-sponsored exhibitions, and art fairs. The deluge of collaborations between Asian and European artists, art institutions, fashion designers and companies since the late 1990s (e.g., Cai Guo-Qiang's fireworks-sprayed Issey Miyake dresses; Yayoi Kusama and Takashi Murakami's partnerships with Louis Vuitton; Dior's exhibition of contemporary Chinese art; Bottega Veneta's art gallery above its retail space on the Bund; Prada Rong Zhai; and Maurizio Cattalan's Gucci-sponsored exhibition in Shanghai) show how intertwined art and fashion have become, establishing what I call the global art-fashion system.[5] While recognizing the exploitative and extractive conditions

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2023, https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/made-in-italy-ecco-le-misure-del-ddl-licenziato-in-via-definitiva -dal-senato/. Like in the fashion industry, while many menus in Italian restaurants may be designed by Italian chefs, food preparation is often executed by immigrant workers.

[4] For more information on factories and fast fashion workshops in the PRC, see for instance Leslie Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (Spiegel & Grau, 2008), and Nellie Chu, *Precarious Accumulation: Fast Fashion Bosses in Transnational Guangzhou* (Duke University Press, 2026).

[5] See my forthcoming and previously published work on this topic, including Jenny Lin, *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai* (Manchester University Press, 2019).

undergirding the global art-fashion system, this article focuses on the collaborative endeavors that subversively flourish and slip through the system. I dispel idealized notions of a singular artist, such as the solo Italian craftsman, toiling away individualistically in the studio/atelier, detached from all social networks and economic demands. My research shows how the values associated with Italian craft and Chinese production, art and fashion, coexist, fluctuate, and cut across national and disciplinary borders, dissolving totalizing categorizations altogether. This article illuminates creative transnational networks and contemporary art-fashion initiatives that counter spurious Made in Italy vs. Made in China binaries, while reviving artisanal traditions across cultures and supporting humane international collaborations.

Made in Italy by Chinese Workers

The phenomenon of Made in Italy garments manufactured by Chinese workers in Italy has received wide coverage since the early twenty-first century. Roberto Saviano's 2006 book, *Gomorrah: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System*, reveals how the far-reaching power of the criminal organization Camorra extends to Made in Italy fashion and the prominent roles immigrant workers have played in the nation's manufacturing processes.[6] Investigative exposés characterize Chinese-owned workshops in Italy as sweatshops with unregulated conditions akin to those found in developing nations.[7] Such accounts clash with romanticized ideals of the European atelier with highly skilled craftspeople—tailors, leatherworkers, furriers, cobblers—working in pristine conditions and idyllic locations.

While many Chinese-owned workshops in Italy produce *pronto moda* (fast fashion), European luxury brands bearing the revered Made in Italy label have also come under scrutiny for utilizing Chinese garment workers. A 2018 *New Yorker* article, "The Chinese Workers who Assemble Designer Bags in Tuscany: Many companies are using inexpensive labor to manufacture handbags that bear the coveted 'Made in Italy' label," calls attention to the high population of Chinese handbag manufacturers in Italian cities.[8] Additional news stories highlight the vast discrepancies between luxury handbags' retail and production costs. In 2024, as reported in *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*, an Italian police investigation "found that Armani bags that retail for €1,800 were being made by a Chinese subcontractor for €93 and then sold on to the group by an intermediary for €250."[9] As a result of these findings, Italian officials

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[6] Roberto Saviano, *Gomorrah: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System*, trans. Virginia Jewiss (Macmillan, 2028). The book has also been adapted into a movie and television series.

[7] See for example *Schiavi del Lusso* (Slaves of Luxury), conducted by journalist Sabrina Giannini and presented by Milena Gabanelli, which aired on the TV program "Report" on Radiotelevisione italiana (RAI) in 2007.

[8] D.T. Max, "The Chinese Workers Who Assemble Designer Bags in Tuscany," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/the-chinese-workers-who-assemble-designer-bags-in-tuscany.

[9] Chloe Mac Donnell, "Made in Italy: is the label just another luxury fashion illusion?," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2025/jul/24/made-in-italy-is-the-label-just-another-luxury-fashion-illusion. Several other fashion houses including Armani, Valentino and Dior have faced similar actions. See for instance Josephine McKenna, "Giorgio Armani subsidiary shut down for 'exploiting Chinese workers,'" *The Telegraph*, April 5, 2024, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/04/05/italian-court-shuts-giorgio-armani-luxury-fashion-factory/; Silvia Sciorilli Borrelli and Kati Chitrakorn, "Milan probes into Dior suppliers' illegal labour unsettle luxury sector," *Financial* Times, June 29, 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/ 8f182b91 -da7e-4ceb-b7e7-8070f70b4ee4; and Emilio Parodi, "LVMH's unit put under court administration over labour

placed Armani and Dior under court-administered monitoring; the orders were lifted in February 2025 as the court reported both brands took sufficient actions.[10] Despite these relatively swift resolutions, similar ongoing investigations reveal how widespread the practice of subcontracting Made in Italy manufacturing has become.

In 2025, Italian officials placed Loro Piana, a century-old Italian brand known for cashmere sweaters that cost thousands of dollars, under court administration for allegations of labor exploitation.[11] As reported in *The Guardian*:

> The ruling arises from an investigation into Italy's luxury goods supply chain that began in 2023. According to the court, Loro Piana—owned by the luxury conglomerate LVMH—outsourced production of some clothing including cashmere jackets to an external Chinese-operated fashion company, which in turn subcontracted the work to two other companies. These were illegal workshops that operated on the outskirts of Milan.[12]

The article details how "news of the order has further tainted the idea of the 'Made in Italy' label, a term that typically denotes high-quality manufacturing."[13] Deborah Lucchetti, national coordinator for the Italian segment of the Clean Clothes Campaign, deems the common belief that luxury and ethics go hand-in-hand an illusion: "Luxury is based on a production system founded on cost reduction, profit maximisation and opaque supply chains based on subcontracting, which often employ immigrant workers who have no protection."[14]

Since the 1980s, Italian fashion houses have taken different positions regarding outsourcing of labor, procurement of materials from and promotion of fashion overseas, and assembly of their apparel and accessories. Some fashion designers eagerly began utilizing Chinese resources and expanding into Asian markets, such as Laura Biagiotti, the so-called "Queen of Cashmere." As reported in *Vogue Italia*, Biagiotti was the first foreign designer to stage a fashion show on The Great Wall of China in 1988.[15] Valentino Clemente Ludovico Garavani and Giorgio Armani made formative trips to China, in 1993 and 2004 respectively, with both designers subsequently integrating traditional Chinese aesthetics into their collections.[16] Proclaiming a more narrowly defined Made in Italy ethos stand houses such as Salvatore Ferragamo, founded by an Italian American immigrant who rose to fame with his footwear designed for Hollywood

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exploitation," *Reuters*, June 11, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/business/retail- consumer/dior-unit-put-under-court -administration-italy-over-labour-exploitation-2024-06-10/.

[10] Emilio Parodi, "Italian court lifts controls placed on Armani company over labour practices," *Reuters*, February 18, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/italian-court-lifts-controls-placed-armani-company-over -labour-practices-2025-02-18/.

[11] Mac Donnell, "'Made in Italy.'"

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Deborah Lucchetti quoted in Mac Donnell, "'Made in Italy.'"

[15] Elisabetta Caprotti, "Un'italiana a Beijing," *Vogue Italia* 778 (June 2015): 20, https://www.proquest.com/vogueitalia/docview/1870263322?accountid=201967&sourcetype=Magazines, accessed June 10, 2026. See, also, advertisement for Laura Biagiotti featuring model in China in *Vogue Italia* 461 (July 1988): 11, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-04/19/content_324423.htm, accessed June 10, 2026.

[16] For media coverage of these trips, see for instance Sheryl Wudunn, "Out There: Beijing, The Great Leap on the Runway," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1993, https://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/23/style/out-there-beijing-the-great-leap-on-the-runway.html; and Chen Jie, "Italian Designer has design on China," *China Daily*, April 19, 2004, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-04/19/content_324423.htm.

stars beginning in the 1920s.[17] Ferragamo eventually moved all of his operations to Florence. To this day, the company's directors, under the leadership of Salvatore Ferragamo's sons, insist on making everything in Italy. Simultaneously, Ferragamo, like so many European fashion brands, stage large-scale promotional events in China.

Scholar Simona Segre Reinach critically analyzes marketing campaigns targeting Chinese consumers with idealized images of Made in Italy manufacturing. She writes about European fashion brands that have hosted events in China, such as Ferragamo's eightieth anniversary traveling show of 2008. While inaugurated at the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai, Ferragamo's anniversary show celebrated "Italianness" via "identification with the Renaissance, artisan skills, and entrepreneurship."[18] The Salvatore Ferragamo Museum in Florence places a similarly heavy emphasis on Italian craftsmanship. An immersive video in the museum's exhibition showcases individuals handcrafting a pair of shoes from start to finish. Cross-cultural engagement appears only in reference to traditional Asian aesthetics, as seen, for instance, in the exhibition's display of Japanese warrior attire and an imperial Chinese robe, intimating how historical East Asian dress has inspired some of Ferragamo's designs.

This has long been the dominant dynamic in twentieth and twenty-first century Italian and Chinese fashion relations. Italian and other European designers have generally been presented and perceived as master craftspeople and visionaries drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese aesthetics, with little to no acknowledgment of modern and contemporary Chinese designers or influences. Scholars like Reinach who question outmoded European biases that undermine contemporary Chinese fashion have simultaneously worked to highlight emerging Chinese fashion designers, such as ZucZuc, Ma Ke, and He Yan, who have been widely overlooked in Europe until recently.[19] Guo Pei, one of the very few Chinese fashion designers to have been included in the popular 2015 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, *China: Through the Looking Glass*, has begun receiving global attention and their own exhibitions in US museums. Chinese designer Uma Wang has established a strong international presence with boutiques in cities from Shanghai to Milan. In Shanghai, Wang recently opened a large-scale Maison featuring her clothing, Paris-based Astier de Villatte ceramics, and artisanal jewelry, with plans to develop an on-site café and cultural event space. On a recent visit to Maison Uma Wang in Shanghai in spring 2026, I encountered the retail display—akin to a gallery exhibition except that you could try on the merchandise—of handmade jewelry by master silversmith Chen Lu. The salespeople sent me a video showcasing Chen Lu's expert craftsmanship and unique approach to experimental jewelry making. Guo Pei, Uma Wang, and Chen Lu, along with many more artisans and designers recast the Made in China label as steeped in inventiveness and remarkable skill.

In addition to China's burgeoning fashion industry, a recent spate of collaborations between Italian fashion houses and Chinese artists, artisans, and cultural icons offer alternatives to uneven, exoticizing representations. Fendi, which staged a spectacular fashion show on the Great Wall in Beijing in 2007, has gone beyond the typical referencing of traditional Chinese aesthetic motifs by directly partnering with contemporary Chinese artists and artisans. In conjunction with the traveling exhibition, "Hand in Hand," shown in Beijing in 2023, Fendi collaborated with two

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[17] This narrative is presented at the Ferragamo Museum in Florence, Italy, which I visited on December 22, 2024.

[18] Simona Segre Reinach, "Fashion and National Identity: Interactions between Italians and Chinese in the Global Fashion Industry," *Business and Economic History* vol. 7 (2009): 2, https://thebhc.org/sites/default/files/reinach.pdf, accessed January 13, 2026.

[19] Ibid.

artisans of the Yi ethnic minority: Axiwuzhimo, head of "Yi Needle Yi Thread," a professional embroidery cooperative dedicated to preserving the tradition of embroidery, and Legu Shari, a silversmith who comes from a family that has been crafting jewelry for fourteen generations.[20] Together with Fendi designers, these artisans created a special edition version of the fashion house's classic handbag, the Baguette, with velvety black fabric embroidered with blue, green, and aqua silk threads, lined in green silk satin, and with a sterling silver Fendi-logo buckle and ornaments. Fendi forged another collaboration with artist Chen Fenwan, who updates the traditional art of Chinese paper-cutting with contemporary content and approaches. Chen's customized Peekaboo bag also appeared in the "Hand in Hand" exhibition. Such collaborations counter notions of Chinese cultural production as inferior by integrating impeccable Chinese craftsmanship and innovative artistry.

Other Italian fashion brands have commissioned Chinese artists to work on their marketing campaigns. For example, Gucci, under former Creative Director Alessandro Michele (now Creative Director of Valentino), collaborated with the late photographer Ren Hang for the brand's 2015 Caleido collection.[21] A couple years later, Gucci's Roman Rhapsody campaign, directed by Michele, featured the owner of one of the oldest and most well-known Chinese restaurants in Rome: Hang Zhou da Sonia. The restauranteur, Zhou Fenxia (also known as Sonia) has become a fashion icon, often seen and pictured donning qipao/cheongsam (form-fitting Chinese dresses popularized in 1920s-30s Shanghai and Hong Kong). Counting Italian celebrities, politicians, and designers like Michele among her restaurant's devoted patrons, Sonia stands as an important community member of the immigrant-rich Esquilino neighborhood, colloquially referred to as Rome's "Chinatown." As described by scholar Gaoheng Zhang in his book, *Fashion Communications Between Italy and China: Unfolding a Sartorial Relationship*:

> Italian customers and media's fascination for [Sonia] was also closely linked to her tireless work in forging a bridge between Roman and Chinese cultures. Western clothing aided this dimension of her public persona. The restauranteur was one of the personalities featured in a 2017 Gucci advertising campaign titled "Roman Rhapsody," which emphasized different facets of Roman life in intimate portraits. In her photograph, Zhou wears a coat with a chevron motif set in brown and black colors that mirror those of her hair and eyes. Her glamor is expressed in the shimmer caused by well-lit exposure of the coat's leather and metal decorations, her theatrical make-up, and her bob haircut with straight bangs. Zhou's eyes glance sideways to the left and her left arm rests on her hips, projecting an air of discernment and authority.[22]

Scholarship by Zhang, Reinach and others critically expands news coverage of the phenomenon of Made in Italy by Chinese workers. Lisa Rofel and Sylvia Yanagisako's *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion* further examines the cross-cultural networks undergirding Italian globalized

[20] "Hand in Hand: China," Fendi website, https://www.fendi.com/us-en/cm/inside-fendi/news/hand-in-hand-china?srsltid=AfmBOoq0pF2QYfMsoaoV4YihL_D97275w4nXF8HBvgAs4cAm_8x7B0rj, accessed February 2, 2026.

[21] Yiling Pan, "Remembering Ren Hang: How the Late Photographer Left His Mark on Art and Luxury in China," *Jing Daily*, March 9, 2017, https://jingdaily.com/posts/remembering-ren-hang-art-and-luxury-in-china.

[22] Gaoheng Zhang, *Fashion Communications Between Italy and China: Unfolding a Sartorial Relationship* (Bloomsbury, 2026), 1–2.

manufacturing, spanning transnational relations of unequal production across China and Italy. Utilizing a collaborative methodology, the authors emphasize interpersonal relationships as essential facets in establishing Chinese-run workshops in Prato and beyond, while also considering how cultural stereotypes intertwine with material contributions and kinships.[23]

The importance of familial and community relations in considering global fashion also comes to the fore in Italian writer Edoardo Nesi's memoir *Storia della mia gente: La rabbia e l'amore della mia vita da industriale di provincia* (*Story of My People: Essays and Social Criticism on Italy's Economy*). Nesi, who grew up in Prato and comes from a long familial line of textile workers, laments the decline of Italian-owned, family operated textile workshops in his hometown. His personal accounts add much to the news coverage of Italy's globalized textile industry, acknowledging the human impacts of Italy's changing industrial landscapes.[24]

Considering familial ties in Prato from a Chinese perspective, the television show *Wenzhou Yijiaren* (*Family on the Go*) focuses on a young woman who emigrates to Prato, Italy from the countryside outside of Wenzhou, China. The series spotlights the hopes and challenges accompanying an entrepreneurial community building a fashion business in Italy. In her book *Chinese Espresso: Contested Race and Convivial Space in Contemporary Italy*, scholar Grazia Ting Deng notes the importance of *Wenzhou Yijiaren* in highlighting "new frontiers of Chinese migration":

> The family progresses from extreme poverty to material success through entrepreneurial effort, overcoming hardships within and beyond the national border during China's Reform and Opening Up era in the 1980s…[and] showcases the social transformation of contemporary China from an impoverished third-world country to a global economic superpower, a narrative in full accord with the state's official account of the reform period. The drama thus glorifies the "Wenzhou spirit" as the Zeitgeist of post-Mao China's struggle for development and prosperity.[25]

Beginning in the 1980s, a first wave of Chinese garment workers to settle in Prato came primarily from Wenzhou, a southeastern city in China's Zhejiang Province, and from neighboring towns and villages in and around Qingtian County. As scholars Tu Lan and Lin Zhang describe:

> 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. 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,

[23] Lisa Rofel and Sylvia Yanagisako, *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion* (Duke University Press, 2019).

[24] Edoardo Nesi, *Storia della mia gente: La rabbia e l'amore della mia vita da industriale di provincia* (Bompiani, 2010). English language version translated as *Story of My People: Essays and Social Criticism on Italy's Economy*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Other Press, 2013).

[25] Grazia Ting, *Chinese Espresso: Contested Race and Convivial Space in Contemporary Italy* (University of California Press, 2024), 18–19.

> China's opening up, and accommodating Italian immigration laws in the 1990s together made Italy the top choice for Wenzhounese migrants. 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* [*on the Go*], 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. 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.[26]

My father's family comes from Wenzhou, and many of my Wenzhounese relatives and their neighbors indeed share an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to travel, study, and work abroad. Shared communications in the Wenzhounese dialect, notoriously difficult to understand for those living outside of the region, help fortify strong connections across international diasporas. As further described by Deng in her chapter in *Handbook of Chinese Migration to Europe*:

> People from the Wenzhou area of southern Zhejiang were historically known as merchants and artisans in China. The mountainous landscape led to an extreme scarcity of arable land for agricultural production. Many people thus engaged in petty trading and migrated to other places to make a living when China was still an agricultural society…The local Wenzhou economy declined rapidly in the early years of the People's Republic, and poverty became rampant. Under these difficult circumstances, a small number of Wenzhou people managed to secretly engage in small-scale underground family businesses after migrating to more economically promising areas within China or overseas. It is unsurprising then that Wenzhou became the first area to react to China's shift towards a market economy beginning in the late 1970s. Many individuals from Wenzhou's countryside migrated to the city proper and other urban areas to make a living. What later became known as the Wenzhou Model—a privatized economy focused on small, self-employed, household-based production—was embedded in linguistic communities, social networks, local labour markets, and other robust local institutions.[27]

While the Wenzhou Model is touted within the PRC as exemplary of enterprising success, it is important not to stereotype all people from Wenzhou and surrounding areas, encompassing a

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[26] Tu Lan and Lin Zhang, "Made in Italy by Chinese: Fashionability and Transnational Chinese Entrepreneurs," *Chinese Journal of Communication* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2024.2311263, accessed March 1, 2026.

[27] Grazia Ting Deng, "From Ethnic Restaurants to Local Coffee Bars: Chinese Migrant Entrepreneurship in Italy's Food Services," in *Handbook of Chinese Migration to Europe*, ed. Mette Thuno, Simeng Wang, Emilie Tran Sautede, and Yu-chin Tseng (Brill, 2024), 385.

vast and diverse population of millions of people, as inherently savvy businesspeople. In the face of idealized stories of success and anti-immigrant rhetoric, acknowledging the individual struggles so many Chinese and other immigrant workers face while attempting to build businesses and support themselves and their families takes on increased urgency. Books, media representations, and art projects foregrounding locals' personal experiences living and working in Italian garment manufacturing centers add nuanced insights into current cross-cultural relations.

Art and Chinese-Italian Relations

Along with growing scholarly and media attention, a new generation of Chinese and Italian artists have been working to represent and even ameliorate these cross-cultural relations. Since 2017, Bologna-based artist Zheng Ningyuan has been running WUXU, an arts and activist collective that centers much of its work in Prato. In a conversation I had with Zheng in December 2024, the artist explains that, following the initial influx of people from Wenzhou and surrounding counties such as Qingtian into Prato in the 1980s–1990s, a second group of Chinese people came from Fuzhou, the artist's hometown.[28] Recently, he has been engaging with members of a third wave of immigrants from countries outside of China, especially Pakistan. For instance, Zheng has assisted and documented Pakistani workers' struggle to establish a maximum number of eight working hours per day, five days per week. As an artist and activist, Zheng documents his gathering with Pakistani workers in a space between the factory and public street—a closed-in concrete area where the workers meet to, among other things, study Italian and Chinese language with the local workers' union. They make posters out of cardboard with handwritten slogans like, *Uniti Nella Lotta* (United in the Struggle).

These meetings and their documentation form part of Zheng's ongoing multimedia project *Teresa Moda*, begun in 2021, which takes its name from a factory in Prato where seven Chinese workers died in a fire in 2013. This tragedy brought to the fore preexisting tensions in Prato, as reported by *The New York Times*:

> The fire at Teresa Moda, and the uproar that followed, exposed the complicated, and at times tense, cohabitation in Prato of Italian residents and Chinese immigrants, who now own nearly 45 percent of the city's manufacturing businesses… And while in Prato there is sympathy for the victims and outrage at the Dickensian conditions under which they lived and worked, the fire in the outlet-turned-factory also exemplified what some Italians say angers them most. Chinese businesses, they say, have flourished while Italian companies have failed because the Chinese ones depend on poorly paid labor and have ignored workplace safety standards in the name of cutting costs.[29]

In a video component of Zheng's *Teresa Moda* project, the artist showcases Zhang Wei, a longtime factory worker and owner in Prato. Zhang's musings, accompanied by footage of him working in the small factory he owns, gives insight into some of the everyday concerns of garment workers in Prato while complicating Made in Italy versus Made in China binaries.

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[28] Zheng Ningyuan in conversation with author, December 3, 2024, Zheng Ningyuan's studio, Bologna, Italy.

[29] Elisabetta Povoledo, "Deadly Factory Fire Bares Racial Tensions in Italy," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/world/europe/deadly-factory-fire-bares-racial-tensions-in-italy.html.

Zhang tearfully describes the hardships he has faced, especially in the aftermath of the emergence of Covid-19, his near bankruptcy, and the hard work and toil he puts into his factory, sewing garments alongside the workers he employs, who, like Zhang, wish for a less exhausting livelihood. Zhang states: "To be honest, working in the factory is really exhausting. Between the years spent in China and those in Italy, it's almost 20 years that I've worked in various factories in the clothing sector. I worked on assembly lines for three years in China and for almost fifteen years in Italy."[30] The artist's even depictions and side-by-side footage of protesting Pakistani workers on the one hand and the factory owner on the other reveal a complex employment terrain. Zheng hopes that the organizing of workers, even if not immediately successful in reducing hours or raising salaries, marks an important step towards empowerment.

Zheng's projects help humanize Prato's many immigrants who vitally support the city's economy. The artist remarks that Chinese people, who have revived Prato as a successful manufacturing center, often face marginalization and/or vilification, especially following the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to growing anti-Chinese sentiment and the widespread alienation that accompanied Covid-19, Zheng and WUXU organized a community-oriented, public art project in Prato. The project, *Yizhongren* (2021), encompassed urban walking and musical performances, and, subsequently, a documentary and bilingual (Chinese and Italian) book, all highlighting everyday experiences of female Chinese residents in Prato. The artists started the project by asking three Chinese women living in Prato to identify a meaningful place in the city, as well as a favorite song that they associated with that place and their experience in it. The artists and participants then led small public tours to the selected sites, where they performed the song with Zheng playing guitar and the women and others singing. One of the featured women describes herself and experience:

> Mi chiamo Qin Huang, ho 42 anni e sono madre di due bambini. Sono venuta in Italia nel 1999 e la mia prima tappa è stata Prato. Avevo 19 anni, guardavo al futuro ed ero piena di speranza. Ricordo che i cinesi a Prato si facevano fare le foto di matrimonio in diversi posti e questo era uno di quelli. Quando mi sono sposata abbiamo scattato alcune foto anche qui. Ora sono nuovamente single, e proprio per questo vorrei condividere la "Danshen qingge/Canzone d'amore del Single." Vivere da sola può anche avere aspetti buoni e positivi.
>
> My name is Qin Huang, I'm 42 years old, and a mother of two children. I came to Italy in 1999 and my first stop was Prato. I was 19 years old, looking at the future and full of hope. I remember that the Chinese in Prato would take wedding photos in diverse places and this was one such place. When I got married we took some photographs here. Now I'm newly single and for this reason I would like to share "Single Love Song." Living alone also has its good and positive aspects.[31]

Qin Huang goes on to explain how she would later become a personal fitness trainer and how her love for health and friendship with clients in Prato helped combat her loneliness. In addition to participants, artists, and attendees who had signed up to take part in the public art event, Chinese and Italian locals in Prato stopped to listen and watch. *Yizhongren* constitutes an

[30] Zhang Wei in Zheng Ningyuan, *Teresa Moda* (two-channel video artwork), Prato, 2021.

[31] Qin Huang quoted in Zheng Ningyuan, ed., *Yizhongren: A WUXU Production* (Prato: Festival Seta, Convitto Nazionale Cicognini, Associazione Culturale Orientiamoci in China, 2019), 29. My translation.

artistic engagement with place that offers individual perspectives and deeply personal site visits that run counter to the mainstream tours rampant in nearby Italian cities.[32]

Zheng researches Prato as both an industrial city and one of the first Italian cities to invest in twentieth and twenty-first century art, exemplified by Prato's most recognizable landmark: a public sculpture by Henry Moore.[33] The British artist originally offered to donate the hulking sculpture, made of slabs of marble conjoined in the form of semi-square with a large hole in it, to the city of Florence. Considering the modern sculpture at odds with Florence's image of Renaissance splendor, officials installed Moore's donated work in the far outreaches of Prato. Moore's sculpture in Prato, along with other contemporary public art in the city, including a figural sculpture by Anthony Gormley, appear in Zheng's video artworks. Zheng continually engages with the fields of art, cultural institutions, industry, and workers, reflecting how they associate with or disassociate from one another. In his work with Pakistani laborers, for instance, he documented and helped the workers hoist a flag reading "8 x 5" (signaling the demanded 8 hours per day, 5 days per week maximum) on the flagpole of Prato's contemporary art museum, Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci (Centro Pecci). In this unsanctioned act, Zheng and the workers staged a small protest that brought workers' rights into the orbit of the museum.

One of Italy's first contemporary, post-World War II art museums, Centro Pecci was established in 1988. As described on the museum's website, Centro Pecci considers itself "the first Italian institution created from the outset with the aim of presenting, collecting, documenting and supporting research in the visual arts, cinema, music, performing arts, architecture, design, fashion and literature, as expressions of the contemporary world that put people in touch with the major themes of life and our society."[34] Textile industrialist Enrico Pecci founded and donated Centro Pecci to the city of Prato in honor of his son, Luigi Pecci, who died prematurely. Pecci has contributed to a burgeoning contemporary Italian art scene, one with roots and continued engagement in the textile and fashion industries.

Connections between Centro Pecci's exhibition of contemporary Chinese artists, such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Ren Hang, as well as institutional partnerships with Chinese institutions signal increased Italian and Chinese connections and the flourishing of what I call a global contemporary art-fashion system. Centro Pecci's current Director, Stefano Collicelli Cagol, for instance, served as a curatorial consultant for By Art Matters, a massive contemporary art center and part of the larger Tianmuli complex, designed by Renzo Piano and located in Hangzhou, China. Established by Chinese fashion brand JNBY co-founder Li Lin, By Art Matters aims to interject more contemporary art into the city of Hangzhou, the culture-rich capital of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) and home to one of China's most renowned art universities: Zhongguo Meishu Xue Yuan (China Art Academy). Currently, the curatorial program of By Art Matters is directed by veteran Italian curator Francesco Bonami, though he remains based in Italy, and local guest curators and designers play primary roles in the museum's exhibitions.

In 2012, Centro Pecci hosted an exhibition by Prato-based Italian artist Leone Contini, in which the artist exhibited vegetables he had grown and many of which he would cook using his

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[32] Prato may be understood in relationship to neighboring Florence, of which it was once part. Whereas Florence is a highly touristic city full of well-preserved Renaissance splendor, constituting a legacy celebrated by Italian luxury brands from Gucci to Ferragamo, Prato has a very small historic city center, with a sprawl of factory complexes surrounding it. In 2013, the year of the fire at Teresa Moda, Prato was reported to have nearly 8,200 factories in the textile and garment manufacturing centers.

[33] Zheng Ningyuan in conversation with the author, December 3, 2024, Zheng Ningyuan's studio, Bologna, Italy.

[34] Centro Pecci website, https://old.centropecci.it/en/about-us, accessed March 1, 2026.

Sicilian grandmother's recipes. The idea for the project was sparked by Contini's memory of his grandmother's house in Florence. He explains that his grandmother's back garden connected to that of her next-door neighbors: a Chinese family who owned one of the first Chinese restaurants in Florence.[35] Contini's grandmother and the Chinese family grew many of the same plants and vegetables, such as gourds, which the artist understood as a special linkage connecting people across cultures. At Contini's Centro Pecci exhibition, sponsored by the Buddhist Temple of Prato, visitors, including many Chinese and Italian people, picked up various vegetables and initiated impromptu dialogues about how they would cook them. Sometimes Italian and Chinese visitors debated the merits of their different recipes, but the conversations remained respectful, playful, and fueled by general interest in each other's cuisines. An accompanying documentary produced by Contini features one of the exhibition's attendees, a Chinese resident of Prato and active member of the Buddhist temple, cutting a lotus root in half and demonstrating how the root's delicate silky strands still connect its two halves. He explains how this demonstrates a widely used idiom in Chinese culture, *Ou duan si lian* (literally, "lotus root breaks but fibers remain joined") meaning that even when loved ones are separated by space, time, and/or emotional fallouts, they stay connected.[36] Contini's vegetable project and its lively reception fostered an all too rare cross-cultural gathering in Prato. Locally considered projects like Contini's exhibition at Centro Pecci, which took place prior to the Teresa Moda fire and Covid-19 pandemic, have increasingly important roles to play in bringing together members of Prato's Chinese and Italian communities and diffusing tensions that have grown in the aftermath of these tragedies.

On January 30, 2025, Contini gave me a tour of Prato and its industrial outskirts. We drove past miles of garment depots: illuminated warehouses with gleaming racks of clothes, ready for wholesale purchase. Like globalization itself, the scale of Macrolotti, Prato's textile districts filled with factories, workshops, and warehouses, felt impossible to grasp. There were several moments when I found myself in Prato, feeling more like I was in China. On the city's outskirts, we passed large KTV (karaoke) lounges that looked like those I had seen in Chinese cities like Hangzhou and Wenzhou—multistoried buildings with flashing neon lights. Across the street from Henry Moore's large public sculpture, I walked into a coffee bar where the Wenzhounese owner was watching a Chinese soap opera. Contini and I walked through Prato's "Chinatown," a name colloquially used but one which, he told me, is criticized by people both on the right (who are anti-immigrant and would rather not recognize the Chinese presence in Prato) and those on the left (who think the term is gentrifying and/or belittling to the Chinese residents who call the district home). The neighborhood's businesses had signs in both Chinese characters and Italian or English, as seen in Ravioli Liu and Wenzhou Market on Via Fabio Filzi, and often only Chinese residents were in sight. We walked by fish markets, grocery stores, clothing stores, bakeries, and restaurants. Contini pointed out how the local government has attempted to turn the district into a tourist zone—widening sidewalks to make the main street more pedestrian friendly and adding large planters resembling little Richard Serra sculptures. He found these beautification schemes suspect, not really serving the neighborhood's residents, most of whom are people from Chinese or other immigrant backgrounds. A new community center in the neighborhood seemed to promote cultural events, but only Italians worked inside and there appeared to be little engagement with or interest from the mostly Chinese locals.

Contini feels that Prato's Buddhist temple, Tempio Puhuasi located in Piazza della

[35] Leone Contini in conversation with author, January 30, 2025, Leone Contini's studio, Prato.

[36] Exhibition attendee speaking in documentation of Leone Contini's *kmO* exhibition, sponsored by Buddhist Temple and presented at Centro Pecci, Prato, 2012.

Gualchierina, serves as a more authentic community center. In addition to the artist's 2012 exhibition at Centro Pecci, the temple helped support several of Contini's projects, including a related cooking event, *Feed Your Head* (2011), in which the artist brought together Chinese and Italian chefs to make dumplings, ravioli, and noodles. During the event, chefs gathered at a winery on the outskirts of Prato in a convivial competition. As I watched video documentation of the event with Contini, he described his initial disappointment that not many Chinese people, aside from the chefs, seemed to be in attendance. Yet, after several minutes, the site began to fill up with both Italian and Chinese people, and crowds formed around the chefs as they made ravioli and dumplings. An Italian chef making dumplings maintained an air of superiority and seemed to dismiss the possibility that the Chinese could possibly make pasta as well as Italians. A young Chinese boy charmed him, as he skillfully helped make ravioli. Soon after, a group of Italians gathered around Chinese women who had started hand pulling noodles. Without machines, they expertly twisted dough made of flour and water into long slim strands. The Italian onlookers' eyes widened at the impressive sight. Contini told me how proud he was of that event, which brought together his Italian and Chinese friends. Yet he also spoke of subsequent threats he received on social media from anti-immigrant right-wingers accusing the artist of cultural pollution. He lamented the seemingly worsening situation in Prato, where he felt tensions between Italians and Chinese rising. Contini solemnly reflected that while the Teresa Moda fire could have provided an opportunity for healing together as a community, these events instead seemed to foment anger by some Italians against the Chinese as supposed perpetrators of exploitative, unsafe working conditions.

Contini took me to the now vacant home of a friend, a Chinese garment factory owner, who used to live there with his family. He would visit the friend often, he remembered, cooking vegetables from his garden and sharing meals with family, employes, and friends. "This is what both the rightwing journalists and leftwing anti-globalization protestors don't tell or show you," Contini reminisced, "these convivial gatherings of workers and bosses, enjoying a meal together—laughing, joking, resting. Perhaps it's different now," he sighed. "Sadly, my friend, the factory boss, like so many Chinese people in Prato, came under attack by rightwing politicians and journalists, who criticized not only their labor practices, but also their growing of vegetables!"[37] By the time Contini showed me the house, it had been abandoned, the factory owner kicked out, and the garden raised to make way for a bicycle path. "Greenwashing," Contini remarked in resignation. For another ongoing project, Contini keeps an archive of journalism lambasting vegetables grown in Italy by Chinese people. Sensationalist headlines like "UFO-vegetables" and "Giant tomatoes!" insinuated that Chinese gardeners used foreign chemicals, growth hormones, and other nefarious and toxic substances. He showed me an article supposedly documenting an "alien vegetable," which, upon looking, contains a photograph of a simple cauliflower. "Prato is a small town and all of us know each other," Contini explained, "so it works to make fun of these so-called investigative journalists by offering rebuttals on social media, like my comical post about the article: 'Let us not fear a cauliflower!'"[38] The artist, who is now pursuing a practice-based PhD at Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti, thinks a lot about how fascism is rooted in fear, and how, if we learn to laugh and not be afraid, to enjoy foreign ideas, culture, and company rather than fearing them, we would all benefit. Contini's planned social gatherings, such as the cook-off between Chinese and Italian chefs, offered important, albeit fleeting platforms for fostering cross-cultural exchange.

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[37] Leone Contini in conversation with the author, January 30, 2025, Prato.
[38] Ibid.

Before meeting with Contini in Prato, I attended "Arte Contemporanea in Toscana" ("Contemporary Art in Tuscany"), a conference hosted on January 30, 2025 at Centro Pecci, in which regional arts institutions that had received awards made presentations about their work to the granting bodies. It struck me that, despite Prato's large Chinese and immigrant populations, I appeared to be the only non-Italian person at the conference. Furthermore, hardly any of the local art institutions discussed cross-cultural relations with one notable exception. The presentation "On Weaving: LOTTOZERO SOCIETÀ COOPERATIVA SOCIALE," delivered by Alessandra Tempesti, Curator at LOTTOZERO, highlighted intercultural projects. An art and textile exhibition space, creative workshop, and residency in Prato, LOTTOZERO aims to offer alternatives to globalized fast fashion, providing sustainable and ethical platforms that support artists and designers from around the world. Tempesti's presentation discussed LOTTOZERO's recent collaborations with international weavers, artists, and designers. One example of these hybrid collaborations culminated in the book *Textile Culture Backup*, co-conceptualized with international institutions, including Center for Heritage, Arts and Textile (CHAT) in Hong Kong.[39] On a recent visit to CHAT in spring 2026, I witnessed similar attempts at fostering equitable and meaningful cross-cultural exchanges through textiles and fiber-based art, and an embrace of artisanal craftsmanship as an alternative to fast fashion in the exhibition, *Threading Inwards*. The exhibition at CHAT celebrated contemporary Asian artists who worked with fibers, their collaborations with artisans, and utilizations of craft traditions towards intercultural understanding. CHAT's website presents the exhibition with a series of questions and an invitation:

> How can we learn to nurture sensibility? How do we care for each other and bear sorrow together? How might we begin to heal ourselves and the world around us? In a time of rapid change, this exhibition invites you to slow down, engage with the work of 14 artists from across Asia, and turn inwards.[40]

While also calling for slower, more sustainable approaches to art and textile making, LOTTOZERO has initiated international partnerships with individual artists and designers, such as with Netherlands-based Chinese artist-in-residence Jiajia Qi.[41] LOTTOZERO has also featured the work of Italian-trained, Chinese-born, Rome-based milliner Yujie Ding. In addition to creating hats, Ding's conceptual art-fashion projects challenge stereotypes of Chinese designers as mere copycats. In a 2020 interview, posted on the LOTTOZERO website, Ding, who lived in Italy for many years, discusses how she directly confronts Made in Italy versus Made in China stereotypes:

> Those who desire "Made in Italy" products, would like to "witness the event" where Italian artisans work with savoir faire on refined objects, just like the solid omnichannel marketing narratives about excellent craftsmanship. Especially Chinese consumers hardly accept that the real producer of their 5000 euro bag is a

[39] Textile Culture Net with TextielMuseum, The Netherlands; Central Museum of Textiles in Poland; CHAT (Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile), Hong Kong; and LOTTOZERO, Italy, *Textile Culture Backup* (Łódź, Poland: Designed by Studio Mut and supported by EU Creative Europe Grant, 2024).

[40] "Threading Inwards," CHAT (Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile), Hong Kong website (2026), https://www.mill6chat.org/event/threading-inwards, accessed March 1, 2026.

[41] "New Artist in Residence: Jiajia Qi," LOTTOZERO website, May 4, 2024, https://www.lottozero.org/news/2023/05/24new-artist-in-residence-jiajia-qi.

> Chinese immigrant. Although there have been many articles and academic studies on this subject, fashion brands still do not tell these facts openly. As a result, the "made by Chinese" in the Italian fashion industry is known but not declared. Instead of passively waiting to be "revealed," I want to take the initiative and declare that my small workshop is a Chinese workshop located in Italy, so that my clients do not have a romanticised expectation about the production process of my hats. They will have no psychological gap when they "know the truth."[42]

On Valentine's Day 2025, I met Ding on Via Ottaviano, a commercial street in Rome's Prati District near Vatican City. She appeared wearing one of her own handmade hats—a black felt fedora with an embroidered design in white stitching on the back and a small braid of white yarn, tied with a black bow, extending from the back. She explained that her idea for the braid was inspired by the long braid of the obligatory queue hairstyle that all male subjects had to wear in Qing Dynasty China. Ding told me that she disliked Italy's conventional beauty and fashion standards. She had lived in Italy for nearly a decade, obtaining degrees in Fashion Studies at the University of Bologna (Rimini campus) and Fashion Design in Verona. She remarked how in New York or London, she could present herself as quirky or weird, and many people would still appreciate her style, whereas she didn't feel most Italians would accept her eccentric fashion sense. She further noted how she's had a hard time selling her hats in Italy and mostly sells them in China in an entrepreneurial collaboration with her mother. At the same time, Ding described her frustrations with the popular fashions in China as luxury brands grew more conspicuous and desirable. She works part-time in a European luxury store near the Spanish steps of Rome, primarily helping Chinese clients, who once made up 90% of the clientele pre-Covid, maybe 30% after, she estimates. "Luxury brands are not fashion," Ding exclaimed.[43] She considers fashion an arena for creativity, a way to work outside of conventions and shape one's own sense of time. When I asked Ding how long it takes to make one of her hats, she responded, "I can't really quantify. I shape a hat overnight, and then go back to it the following days, embroider at some point and add features, like the braid, later. I'm not really sure how many hours pass, but I like it that way, as I enjoy handmaking hats as a single producer, working in my own space and in my own time."[44]

Conclusion and Future Directions

Following my conversations with Ding and reflecting on the immense skill, creativity, and time she poured into designing and making her one-of-a-kind hats, I thought again about my encounter with the scarf salesman in Rome. What if I had engaged him in a discussion about our preconceptions of Made in Italy versus Made in China? Throughout western Europe, originality and creativity versus derivation and copying comprise widespread preconceived notions attached to Made in Italy versus Made in China labels. While Europeans have been quick to label Chinese people as copycats, European designers' integration of Chinese aesthetics typically receive hearty acceptance as creative inspiration.

A decade ago, such uneven associations regarding Chinese and European fashions abounded in the exhibition, *China: Through the Looking Glass*, presented at the Metropolitan Museum of

[42] "Portrait: Yujie Ding, LOTTOZERO website, June 3, 2020, https://www.lottozero.org/portrait-yujie-ding.
[43] Yujie Ding in conversation with the author, February 14, 2025, Rome.
[44] Ibid.

Art in New York City. As I wrote in my book, *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai*:

> The exhibition's twentieth and twenty-first-century fashions displayed were almost all designed by Western European and North American figures, highlighting Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Ralph Lauren, Alexander McQueen, Valentino, House of Chanel, and House of Givenchy, among others. The historical referents, meanwhile, were almost all Chinese, culled from vast stretches of time and genres (e.g., ancient earthenware, dynastic embroidered silk, ink painting and calligraphy, white and blue porcelain, 1920s-era Shanghai movie starlet style, Mao suits), and all collapsed under the equivocal labels of "China" and "East." The exhibition's pairing of recent Western fashions with older Chinese costumes and decorative arts betrays the underlying premise that Chinese culture is inherently historic, traditional, steeped in the country's dynastic past, and influential, whereas Western culture is inherently modern, contemporary, fashionable, and referential—an essentializing myth steeped in divisive binaries that scholars, curators, and practitioners of contemporary art and design must finally move beyond."[45]

Despite these limitations, the Chinese fashion designers included in *China: Through the Looking Glass*, such as Guo Pei and Laurence Xu, and Chinese-born, US-based designer Vivienne Tam, have recently received increased attention, signaling ongoing cultural shifts.

In searching for more equitable intercultural representations of contemporary art and fashion, this article has highlighted collaborations between Italian and Chinese brands, artists, and artisans, while pointing to several Chinese fashion designers worthy of further study. A reclaiming of pride in the meaning of Made in China has recently emerged among young artists and designers working within China, across the Chinese diaspora, and beyond. In the mid-aughts, many emerging creatives shared fashion designer Christopher Bu's sentiment: "I would…like to show the world, especially the young people out there, real Chinese craftsmanship since it's somehow getting harder for people to see this through the process of globalization."[46]

A decade following *China: Through the Looking Glass*, another exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie* (2025) afforded more agency to Chinese and Chinese American artists while directly confronting the imperialist European legacies of Chinoiserie. Reflecting on both exhibitions, scholar Anne Anlin Cheng (who contributed to *Monstrous Beauty*) writes:

> *Chinoiserie*, a stylized rendition of Chinese people, culture, and aesthetics cultivated by early 18th-century European decorative arts, has long been considered a minor, even denigrated, aesthetic category, associated with feminine frivolity and artificiality, a decadent superficiality that has come to be symbolized by Asiatic femininity itself. Yet, despite the charges of cultural appropriation and racist projection, both the trope of the exotic Asian woman and chinoiserie continue to thrive in contemporary life and culture. As recently as 2015, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted its own sumptuous, Orientalist sensorium

[45] Jenny Lin, *Above Sea*, 149.
[46] Christopher Bu quoted in Gemma A. Williams, *Fashion China* (I.B. Tauris, 2015), 41.

> in the enormously popular exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass*, which explicitly celebrated the fantasy of China as "a land of free-floating symbols." Yes, chinoiserie is very much alive…*Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie* emerged as this expansive, profound, and at times wry meditation on the interchange between style, racialized femininity, global commodity, beauty, violence, private desires, and national ambitions. Underpinning the exhibition is the implicit question: How does something as superficial as style become the foundation for imagining human value and embodiment?[47]

One of the featured artists in *Monstrous Beauty*, Jennifer Ling Datchuk, has worked extensively with artisans in China. Trained in ceramics, Datchuk has collaborated with artisans in Jingdezhen, China's capital of ceramic production. Her work often incorporates traditional Chinese crafts as well as beauty supplies—from porcelain to wigs made of human hair—while also calling attention to the people involved in all levels of production. Reflecting on her matrilineage of factory work, Datchuk highlights the essential but often overlooked roles of female workers:

> As the granddaughter of factory workers, my Irish American grandmother was just one of a handful of women who worked the assembly line of a car manufacturing plant, and my Chinese grandmother worked in a sewing factory, located deep within the alleys of Chinatown, for an American retailer. Their hands adapted through the constant path and rumble of the industrial sewing machine and as cars and the assembly-line work modernized with computers and automation. My grandmothers faced poverty, political and social oppression, and personal trauma. Eat bitterness. They were both tough, independent women during a time when women weren't supposed to be either.[48]

She further reflects:

> I often think of the label 'Made in China' and how it's associated with objects that are cheaply and poorly made. What makes their labor and bodies any less than that of American labor? We need to acknowledge and confront the capitalist systems in place that have created an American ruling class that for decades have put profits over people and continually exploit global inequality.[49]

By humanizing garment workers and foregrounding personal stories of people working in factories, Datchuk joins a chorus of vital contributions by scholars, artists, and designers such as those discussed throughout this essay: Gaoheng Zhang, Simona Segre Reinach, Lisa Rofel, Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, Edoardo Nesi, Grazie Ting Deng, Zheng Ninyuan, Leone Contini, Alessandra Tempesti, Yujie Ding, and more. These writers, artists, and designers forge scholarly

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[47] Anne Cheng, "The Met Finally Meets Asian Femininity on Its Own Terms," *Hyperallergic*, June 26, 2025, https://hyperallergic.com/the-met-finally-meets-asian-femininity-on-its-own-terms/.

[48] Jennifer Ling Datchuk, "Eat Bitterness" (2023), Jennifer Ling Datchuk website, https://jenniferlingdatchuk.com/Eat-Bitterness, accessed March 1, 2026

[49] Ibid., https://jenniferlingdatchuk.com/Live-to-Die, accessed March 1, 2026.

and creative transnational networks that support those who design, make, and circulate what we wear. Silky threads, like the fibers of lotus roots, connect individuals within the global art-fashion system, while quietly critiquing late capitalism's prevailing norms. Rather than emphasizing economic profit above all else, engaging in dehumanizing exploitation, and enforcing nationalist, nativist movements, the creative projects I've shared prioritize human connection and respectful cross-cultural collaborations. Such intercultural endeavors, of which I hope and expect we will see more, unravel simplistic views of what it means to be made in Italy, China, or any one country.