

## Ethnic enclave or transcultural edge? Reassessing the Prato district through digital mapping

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Relations between Italy and other countries – such as China – are often imagined within a binary frame that essentialises national and ethnic communities and fails to recognise the complex transcultural ramifications of an increasingly globalising world. This is particularly problematic when studying those social and cultural spaces that Ilaria Vanni (2016) has described as transcultural edges. These are marginal spaces of transition and encounters between different cultures and societies, which have the potential to create new, innovative and productive ecosystems. We argue that one such space is Prato, an industrial town near Florence, well known for its textile district, and host to one of the largest Chinese communities in Europe. Significant academic attention has been devoted to the Chinese community in Prato, including studies of its social and economic impact on the host local community and the textile industry. Most of these studies tend to isolate the Chinese community from the ethnic complexity of the area, within a binary frame that fails to acknowledge the large presence of other migrant groups and the reciprocal permeability and transculturation between the Chinese community, the Italian community, and other ethnic groups. As part of a larger project, a group of scholars is currently digitally remapping Prato, to include quantitative and qualitative geolocalised information collected through a multidisciplinary method that includes ethnography, media analysis, translation studies, transcultural studies, and digital participatory action research. Through a brief description of the aims and characteristics of this research project, the paper will discuss the importance of rethinking the relationship between Italy and China, and between Italians and Chinese, within a more complex and nuanced transcultural frame.

**Keywords:** Chinese in Italy; digital participatory action research; Prato (Italy); migration; transcultural.

### Introduction

This article is part of a larger research project that investigates the social and cultural factors that hinder the social inclusion of migrant individuals, families, and communities in urban neighbourhoods. The premise of this part of the project is that, in studying the complex relationships between Italy and Asia, we cannot ignore the large migration to Italy from Asian countries, the constant transcultural interrelation between Italians and Asian migrants, and the emergence of a new generation of Italians of Asian background. Central to the study of the many complex ways in which

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Italian cultures, societies and communities have been informed by transcultural exchanges with Asian countries and Asian peoples is the notion of ‘transnationalism from below’ (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). It is an approach that recognises the influence of migrant workers and their children on the reciprocal transcultural transformations that migration engenders in society.

Studying ‘transnationalism from below’ also means, in our opinion, studying ‘transnationalism on the ground’, that is, focusing on specific local communities and the way migrants ground themselves in a new locality, and make it home, while simultaneously changing it in the process. This is not to underestimate the importance of complex transnational networks, but rather to suggest that such networks are in fact translocal, that is, linked to specific localities. Transnational migration flows produce ‘transcultural edges’ (Vanni 2016). These are places of productive encounters and reciprocal exchanges between different cultures in a migratory context. The town of Prato and its hinterland represent an ideal case study of such a transcultural edge, not only because of the presence of the second largest Chinese community in Italy (and one of the largest in Europe), but also for the large presence of other migrant groups; and for the transcultural interactions not just between Italians and migrants, but also between different ethnic groups.

While Prato is arguably one of the most studied multicultural urban contexts in Italy, much of the scholarship has concentrated on the relationship between *pratesi* and the Chinese community. Little attention has been paid to the plurality of ethnic groups and cultures that have settled in Prato since the 1980s, nor to the interaction between these groups. In order to develop a multifaceted discussion of the complex cultural and social interactions amongst the inhabitants of this multi-ethnic and superdiverse town, we propose a new approach, framed by a transcultural methodology and informed by participatory research practices. Traditional approaches to the study of specific ethnic communities tend to underestimate the actual social, cultural and demographic complexity of urban areas with a high presence of migrants (Goodson and Grzymala-Kazłowska 2017). When considering the city of Prato, for instance, researchers usually focus on the business sector, specifically the textile industry, and on the Chinese community’s interaction with the locals. By adopting a transcultural methodology, we draw attention to the need to focus on the reciprocity of cultural exchanges and influences between the many different migrant communities who live and work in Prato, and not limit the discussion to the Chinese-Italian dichotomy. Further, the specificity of Prato should be considered within the broader Italian, European and global context.

By ‘participatory research’ we mean research practices that go beyond the realm of academia and involve migrants and their children as co-creators of research and creative outputs that have public impact. Research that incorporates an activist component is particularly relevant in the current political climate, which in Italy and elsewhere is drifting towards more overtly racist, populist and xenophobic public policies and discourses. Collaborative and multidisciplinary approaches enable the individuals and communities that are the object of these studies to become active participants in and subjects of the research. It is our contention that collaborating with academics will support communities in acquiring more cultural, social and political capital.

At the core of our argument is the idea that an increasingly globalising world cannot be understood through binary studies of, for instance, Chinese-Italian relations. Instead, we should direct attention to the actual transcultural and transnational complexity of precise localities, in order to understand and influence the way in which global phenomena come to be experienced locally, within increasingly diverse communities. In other words, the question is no longer how Chinese migrants portray, imagine and interact with Italians, or how Italians portray, imagine and interact with Chinese migrants. Such binary perspectives reinforce essentialised and often nationalistic perspectives that are at best of little use and at worst dangerous. The notion of ‘national culture’ is highly problematic, as it seems to purport that there are beliefs, values, assumptions and

knowledge universally shared by all members of a community within neatly defined political borders. Such a generalising assumption of uniformity within the territory of a state clearly does little justice to the diversity, ambivalence and extreme variation which can and usually will exist between the people of the same nationality or indeed within any other group considered to be sharing a culture. Instead, we argue that the focus should shift to how – in superdiverse and transcultural local contexts – culture is constantly produced in the interaction between people, resulting in deep, rich and multilayered reciprocal influences between different, already complex cultures. Such intercultural exchange may produce societies and communities that are culturally, socially, politically and economically more cohesive and productive. This, however, is a complex social and cultural challenge that academics need to address in collaboration with local communities, migrants, politicians, and other stakeholders.

The article, first, provides a brief review of academic research to date on migrant communities in Prato. It then considers how a transcultural and participatory methodology can potentially reshape this field of study. Finally, we argue for the urgent need to implement and develop such an approach not only in Prato, but wherever superdiverse communities are emerging. Rethinking Italy-Asia relations ‘from below’ and ‘from the ground’, means discovering a complex transcultural environment that is still too often contested by politicians and the media, and overlooked by scholars.

### Overview of research to date

Prato has the second largest presence of Chinese migrants in Italy, second only to Milan, which is, of course, a much larger city with a longer historical presence of a Chinese community. It is difficult to provide specific data about the presence of migrants in Prato, as there is not a clear demarcation between the Prato area, the Florence area and other nearby areas, such as Sesto Fiorentino, and often migrants move around, work in one area and live in another, come and go within and beyond Tuscany and even Italy. According to local government statistics based on registered residents, as of 31 December 2017, foreign residents represent 19.7% of the total population, making Prato the Italian city with the highest percentage of foreign residents in Italy (Ufficio di Statistica 2018). Chinese represent 54% of documented migrants with a presence of 20,695, followed by Albanians (11%), Romanians (9%), Pakistanis (5%) and Moroccans (4%). This data is an underestimation of real figures, due to undocumented migration and the way in which Italian legislation assigns residence permits on the basis of employment, thus increasing the likelihood of migrants becoming ‘illegal’ in an increasingly casualised job market (Ambrosini 2016). A report released by the European Union in 2013 estimated the actual Chinese population of Prato in that year to be between 30,000 and 40,000 people (Latham and Wu 2013, 35). Since the mid-1990s the influx of Chinese migrants from the city of Wenzhou, and from the Zhejiang province as a whole, has dramatically transformed local identities and industrial production models on social, economic and political levels, turning Prato into ‘a European “hotspot” for migration and integration issues’ (Baldassar et al. 2015b, 8).

A key contribution to research in this area is that of Fabio Bracci, who in 2010 developed a complex and in-depth analysis of the levels of interaction between Italian and non-Italian populations, analysing both the attitude of Prato’s Italian population towards migrants and the perceived level of integration of the different migrant communities living in Prato (Bracci 2010). Bracci’s study reveals a decrease in the level of racism and xenophobia towards foreign residents compared to a previous 2006 study conducted by the province of Prato (Bracci, Mamaj and Sambo 2006). Bracci conducted 400 interviews with migrants of different nationalities. Half of the interviewees

claimed the coexistence of a sense of belonging to Italy and to their homeland, evidencing a satisfactory level of integration for many of the migrants surveyed (145–151). The results also reveal how the participants' sense of belonging is usually influenced by their level of education, the length of their stay in Italy, their religion, as well as by crucial socio-economic variables. Most interestingly though, as one of the few works that does not solely focus on the Chinese community, this study highlights how integration rates vary significantly across different communities: for example, while most Albanians affirmed that they had established strong relationships with Italian residents, Chinese and African migrants declared that they tended to engage mainly with members of their own communities (176–183). While this kind of in-depth comparative study across different migrant communities has not been replicated to date, Bracci's study confirms and expands findings from earlier studies on the Pakistani (Abdul Gondaf 2003), Albanian (Jace and Zejnati 2003) and Moroccan (Semmaa and Salvati 2003) communities in Prato.

Given the impact that Chinese migration has had on the history of Prato, it is not surprising that most scholarly studies have focused on the Chinese community's contribution to the social and economic development of Prato and, in particular, on how, in less than 25 years, Chinese migrants went from being employed in the local Italian garment industry to developing autonomous and innovative fast-fashion production models that today operate on a local, national and global scale (Guercini et al. 2017, Baldassar et al. 2015a, Ceccagno 2003, 2017, Johanson, Smyth, and French 2009, Dei Ottati 2009). In her overview of the extensive literature on the topic, Gabi Dei Ottati suggests that studies on Chinese entrepreneurship in Prato have framed it using three main distinct interpretations (Dei Ottati 2013). One view, proposed by studies on Chinese entrepreneurship conducted in the early 2000s, stressed the critical role played by Chinese businesses during the 1990s as sub-contractors for the local Italian garment industry (Ceccagno 2003). As Antonella Ceccagno notes, the importance of Chinese businesses in 'revitalising the district and pushing the local productive sector to modify and adapt' (2009, 69) became even more apparent when Chinese entrepreneurs moved into the production of fast-fashion garments in the early 2000s, launching Prato into the global market and making the local industry more competitive. The same events are presented from a completely different perspective in the media, where the argument is made that instead of building a complementary industrial district, Chinese entrepreneurs developed a parallel and alternative industrial district with detrimental effects on the local economy (Pieraccini 2008). This development is attributed largely to the widespread reliance on undocumented migrant workers, tax evasion and import of textiles from China (Dei Ottati 2013, 25). Dei Ottati offers an alternative model that avoids, in her opinion, the pitfalls of previous interpretations. Looking at the history of Chinese migration in the area and building on the results of a 2009 survey conducted by the Prato Chamber of Commerce, she argues that Chinese entrepreneurship first started as a form of subaltern economy with no social integration and has now reached a second phase where it exists in a relative economic and social separation from the local economy. This separation, she concludes, can only be overcome by enacting policies where economic and social inclusion proceed side by side (Dei Ottati 2013, 38).

Dei Ottati's interpretation and her insistence on studying the relationships between local and migrant entrepreneurs in light of the presence or absence of cultural and social exchanges has proved a popular approach for scholars in the field, who are now exploring the emerging impact of second generations in processes of transculturation and of socio-economic exchange (Guercini et al. 2017, Lazeretti and Capone 2017). This approach also takes into account another critical aspect of the existing literature on migration to the city of Prato, that is, the role of national and local migration policies in producing and enacting exclusionary narratives and practices that significantly limit social, cultural and economic exchanges across communities. Reflecting on the

emergence of media and public discourses that attributed the weakening of Prato's industrial sector to the growing influx of Chinese migrants in that same period, Bracci notes how this type of discourse was largely contrived and promoted by right-wing parties to win the local elections of 2009 (2015). As Bracci convincingly argues, the crisis of the local textile and garment industry had much deeper, local roots (99) but the xenophobic rhetoric deployed during the political campaign succeeded in turning the Chinese community into the 'perfect enemy' (93) and in popularising narratives of exclusion and racism that persist to this day. Media discourse also played and continues to play a key role in shaping public opinion on the Chinese community. Apart from a few exceptions, Italian media rarely gave space to Chinese voices and faces while lamenting, at the same time, their lack of integration into Italian society and further contributing to the popularisation of segregation narratives and attitudes (Latham and Wu 2013). Similar issues have been addressed by Valentina Pedone in her overview of recent documentaries that focus on Chinese migrants living in Italy, like *L'occupazione Cinese: Made in Prato* by Massimo Luconi, 2013. While these works attempt to offer positive representations of the Chinese community, they often fall into the trap of essentialism, reinforcing stereotypes and divisions (Pedone 2018). The lack of creative input by migrant communities is also a defining quality of recent Italian cinema when it comes to the representation of the Chinese community (Zhang 2017). Nevertheless, smaller participatory media, documentary and literary projects, like *TG Multietnico, Ripeti con Me, Il Kaleidoscopio: visioni interculturali/The Kaleidoscope: Intercultural Visions* (Luciano Luongo, Ivan D'Alì, and Gianni Bianchi, 2011) and *La città vista e vissuta dai pratesi di seconda generazione* (Monash University, 2015), attempt to counter dominant narratives and representations often through the creative input and direction of second generations and young migrants.

### Second generations and migrant youth

In the school year 2016/2017 young migrants and children of migrants made up 26.1% of the total number of students in the province of Prato, with a marked increase of 8% compared to the previous year (Provincia di Prato 2017, 18). These 9,819 students of migrant heritage are enrolled across all levels of education, from pre-school to upper-secondary school, and around 80% of them were born in Italy (24). The number of young migrants and second generations currently enrolled in the school system of the province of Prato is almost three times that of the national average in Italy, which, for the same school year, was 9.4% (Ministero dell'Istruzione 2018, 10). This marked and growing presence is reflected in the emerging scholarship on how young migrants and children of migrants understand, frame and perform their sense of belonging in the city of Prato. As for the larger framework adopted to study migration in Prato, scholarly research on the role played by young migrants and second generations has, again, focused largely on the Chinese community (Raffaetà, Baldassar, and Harris 2016, Paciocco and Baldassar 2017, Baldassar and Raffaetà 2018, Paciocco 2018, Ceccagno 2004, Marsden 2015). While students of Chinese heritage constitute 49.5% of students of non-Italian background, there are another 84 nationalities represented in the school system of the province of Prato, with Albanians, Moroccans, Romanians and Pakistanis being the next largest groups (Provincia di Prato 2017, 19).

Recent research has stressed the need to study how the Chinese youth in Prato negotiate their own sense of identity by deploying a multi-disciplinary approach that combines migration and youth studies. Such an approach would facilitate a more accurate portrayal of the complex and dynamic ways in which young migrants and second generations deploy multiple practices of trans-local belonging in ways that 'are not easily captured by either immigrant identity approaches or frameworks of hybridity' (Raffaetà, Baldassar, and Harris 2016, 435). In their recent study of a

group of Chinese-Pratesi secondary school students, Paciocco and Baldassar argue that this trans-local sense of identity can be best understood as placed at the intersection between locally produced Chinese and Italian social identities (Paciocco and Baldassar 2017). As they explain, ‘Chineseness’ emerges as a default identity marker largely due to exclusionary discourses and restrictive Italian legislation on non-EU migrants that in turn feeds prejudice and racism, rendering them ‘other’ to the eyes of non-Chinese *pratesi* (104–106). Italian identity is thus largely self-ascribed by participants in the study and connected to their knowledge of the Italian language and their acquisition of Italian cultural and social traits (107–110). This hybrid Chinese-Italian identity emerges as the result of social interactions that are limited to local Italian and Chinese social spaces and does not extend beyond Prato (110–111). Most interestingly though, Paciocco and Baldassar (2017) frame this hybrid and hyphenated sense of belonging as a potential tool that the young second generations can use to enter the local Italian business space, making use of their social and cultural capital.

Two important issues emerge from these studies: firstly, the recognition that even within specific ethnic communities there are remarkable differences and, second, the level of racism and xenophobia displayed by the host society is the most significant deterrent to transculturation in a multiethnic environment. Both issues merit further attention in future research. Our project takes as a given that ‘young Chinese migrants are socially stratified and heterogeneous, comprising a cross-section of social groups’ (Paciocco and Baldassar 2017, 102). We believe it is important to concentrate on the intersection of ethnicity with other key factors such as class and gender; a topic that is often flagged (Ceccagno 2007); (Marsden 2014) but rarely addressed (Wu and Liu 2014).

Of direct relevance to the transcultural approach that we are advocating, are the findings from previous research confirming that the racism, xenophobia and the degree of classism displayed by Italians in Prato, have had a negative impact on migrants’ ability and willingness to transculturate (that is, to influence and be influenced by Italians). Despite such hostility and imbalance of power, forms of transculturation have still developed, especially among the youth and new generations. For instance, Paciocco and Baldassar (2017) emphasise how the Italian-schooled Chinese youth they interviewed ‘grew up in a hostile social and political environment’ (105), yet these same students ‘did not claim a sense of belonging to Wenzhou or to mainland China because their habitus has been shaped in a different cultural location’ (107). Unfortunately, most studies fail to engage with local Italians and to identify the reciprocity of such transcultural processes, that is, how migrants have changed the Italian community in Prato, and the city itself. We aim to redress this gap by ensuring that the participants in our digital story-telling project, described below, include both local and migrant youths, their parents and teachers as well as migrant and local community organisations.

### **Towards a transcultural and participatory methodology**

While studies of Prato and its ethnic communities to date provide a rich array of important information, traditional approaches to research tend to prevail over participatory approaches. We argue that contemporary research on superdiverse communities can be enriched through four key strategies. First, quantitative, qualitative and participatory data must be integrated through multidisciplinary approaches. Second, traditional models of interaction between scholars and the community must be challenged, so as to develop non-linear, more authentic and more productive modes of co-operation and co-creation between academics and members of the community. Third, transcultural, multi-scalar and multi-layered analyses of migrants’ presence within specific urban contexts should challenge prevailing national, ethno-centric and binary representations of specific ethnic

communities (see Glick Schiller 2012, 2015, Glick Schiller and Schmidt 2016). And finally, the findings emerging from the analysis of the data should not remain confined to academia. Instead, open source, engaging and interactive access to the data through digital visualisation and storytelling should be created and shared, to the benefit of migrants themselves, but also of policy makers, administrators, community organisations, and the broader society.

The combination of qualitative and participatory research with quantitative data is particularly important when investigating intergenerational processes within transnational migration (Laaroussi 2017). The integration of demographic data with intergenerational narratives and visual representations of transcultural processes of emplacement and integration provides essential synchronic and diachronic perspectives on the complex and rapid changes that affect increasingly more diverse urban contexts. Effective models for promoting values and strategies of social inclusion and social cohesion require the development of close collaboration and co-production with young migrants, their classmates and other stakeholders (Matras and Robertson 2017). Participatory action research is in fact particularly indicated in instances in which the perspective of children and youth has been largely overlooked (Shamrova and Cummings 2017). While the importance of the involvement of children and youths in decision-making processes is constantly acknowledged in documents about human rights (Gal 2017), their active participation in research and policy development remains limited. Non-linear models of participatory research that challenge traditional roles in research and teaching, as well as established modes of co-operation between academics and external stakeholders, are essential to identify the actual issues faced by migrants, and the relevant solutions that can be organically developed within specific communities.

An interactive digital mapping project that we are currently developing in Prato provides a localised example of the methodology we believe should be applied to the study of superdiverse communities. Through a series of collaborative workshops based upon the format of hackathons, the project will produce an opensource, multilayered and interactive digital mapping of Prato, which will provide an original interpretation of the city from the many perspectives of its youth, through geo-localised stories, photographs and videos produced directly by school students and other inhabitants of Prato and its district. The main areas of focus will be on transculturation, urban life, playful and creative practices, and the way different communities and cultures interact and influence each other by sharing and negotiating common spaces used for a range of cultural and social practices.

The overall project is structured around a series of smaller and interconnected projects that are being developed through a series of research funding applications, and through collaborations with scholars, institutions and associations at local, national and European level. The project consists of three phases:

1. The development of participatory design and storytelling workshops, based on the theme of 'one city, many cultures', with local secondary schools in Prato that include a large proportion of students from migrant background. Students will be invited to produce stories around their engagement with different cultures and communities within their city.
2. The development of hackathons with the students, their parents, and their teachers. Through the presence of experienced designers, the information and artefacts produced during the hackathons will be mapped in real time onto a multilayered digital map of Prato.
3. The activities and resources used and produced, including educational resources for secondary and tertiary students, will be made publicly available.

Our overall aim is to contribute to the development of research approaches that can better capture and help to understand the actual ‘heterogeneity, complexity and fluidity’ of superdiverse communities (Goodson and Grzymala-Kazłowska 2017). One way of doing this is by developing models of participatory research, storytelling and visualisation that challenge the divide not just between the ‘locals’ and different ethnic groups, but also between the university and the broader community (Glick Schiller 2011). Further, a renewed focus on migrants’ urban emplacement, understood as the relationship between the constant changes that affect an urban context, and the complex transcultural and intersectional networks developed within that context, raises awareness about the capacity of migrants to acquire and accumulate social, cultural and financial capital within the constraints of a specific locality, but also through complex transnational, translocal and global networks (see for instance Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013).

To achieve such a model of participatory research, we propose three key strategies:

1. loosening the rigid boundaries between research, teaching and public impact by developing projects in which these three aspects of academic work are so deeply intertwined that it becomes impossible to untangle them. We recognise that this would have practical implications when applying for grants, for instance, as funding bodies usually expect projects to be categorised either as research or education. Similarly, despite the current preoccupation with the ‘research impact’ agenda, universities still struggle to recognise non-traditional outputs as research. Nevertheless, to achieve real-world outcomes it is of vital importance that these three components come together;
2. utilising digital technology to facilitate the participation of communities, and especially minorities, in academic projects that are action and impact oriented;
3. developing projects that engender and reinforce opportunities for migrants to become not just visible in the community, but reachable, present in actual social and community contexts, and acknowledged as a vital and productive part of the community.

Starting from these theoretical and methodological convictions, we are building a multidisciplinary research team with expertise in migration and translation and transcultural studies, but also in participatory mapping, hackathons, and digital visualisation and storytelling. Culturally diverse communities need to develop successful tools for digital storytelling and visualisation, as an effective and affective alternative to the xenophobic content that is easily spread through mass media, social media and public discourse.

### **Connecting personal stories and spatial histories**

To achieve these aims, we are working on a series of concurrent initiatives. One initiative is the ‘Crosshatching Prato’ collaborative media project, which adopts a process-based approach and methodology that aligns with contemporary participatory documentary practices. ‘Crosshatching Prato’ builds on previous Prato-based studies on the use of mobile phones, social media, technology and their impact on migrant interconnectedness and sense of belonging (Johanson and Fladrich 2015, Johanson and Denison 2010, Xue et al. 2018), and on the previous local storytelling projects mentioned earlier (Luciano Luongo, Ivan D’Alì, and Gianni Bianchi, 2011; Monash University, 2015).

Treating the urban space of Prato as a digital fabric, this initiative aims at displaying how migrant youths live, interact and move across the city, highlighting nodes of interaction and visualising how particular social spaces are negotiated. Students from two local schools in Prato that include a large proportion of students from migrant background will be invited to participate in



storytelling workshops to discuss how they interact with the urban fabric of the city. In this first phase they will identify spaces that resonate with their own sense of belonging and identity, tracking them on a map, assigning them to different themes and categories (home, travel, friends, food, sport) and then drawing routes that connect them. In the second phase, workshop facilitators will work alongside participants to discover the history of those areas, unravelling historical threads and connecting them with the individual life stories of students. The third phase of the project will train participants in the use of audio, photo, video recording and editing software so that they can generate and produce their own stories. Participants will then move out into the city to transform each story-node into short five-minute videos, podcasts or photographs. Each story-node will then be uploaded on a geographic information system. The final product will be an interconnected, non-linear interactive documentary consisting of 75 story-nodes that users can experience either by following the individual stories of participants or by visualising sites of interactions and specific themes on the digital map. In line with the transcultural approach adopted for the larger project, our objective with 'Crosshatching Prato' is to foster the possibilities offered by emerging technologies to challenge the power relations between subjects and creators that persist in mainstream media projects by enacting instead 'open space' documentary practices (Zimmermann and De Michiel 2017).

## Conclusion

Our brief overview of research to date confirms that significant academic attention has been devoted to the economic impact that the Chinese community in Prato has had on the host local community and the textile industry, but that much less attention has been paid to many other essential aspects of social and cultural life. Further, most studies tend to isolate the Chinese community from the ethnic complexity of the area, within a binary frame that fails to acknowledge the large presence of other migrant groups and the reciprocal permeability and transculturation between the Chinese community, the Italian community, and other ethnic groups.

In contrast, our project aims to develop a more complex theoretical construction of the experience of second generations that takes account of the ways in which migration processes tend to create new social landscapes, connecting spatially separate places and groups, as well as a new category of social actors, *transmigrants* (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc 1992), who maintain a wide variety of affective and instrumental social relations across national borders. Within this framework, which is far from being simply an extension of their 'native lands' and their traditional 'roots', the second generation negotiate and define collective identities separately from their ethnic and cultural citizenship. Take, for example, the three associations of children of immigrants that have gained significant visibility and acquired a growing role in representing the voice of 'new Italians' in the public sphere: GMI (Giovani Musulmani d'Italia, established in 2001); G2 Seconde Generazioni; and AssoCina (both established in 2005). The three associations often work together to promote social inclusion initiatives. Of particular interest to our project is the way AssoCina openly criticises the 'first generation' for remaining tightly enclosed in an ethnic enclave, and for being incapable of genuine forms of interaction with Italians. Ethnic closure is not an environment that effectively promotes successful transculturation. Rather, it seems to be a way of lessening everyday difficulties, especially problems in communicating with the Italian host society. Interestingly, language appears to be the main symbolic factor marking the boundaries between the different generations. For the older generations, the ethnic/national community is above all a language community, an enclave where members feel more at ease because they can more easily express themselves and understand each other. However, for the younger generations,

the capacity to maintain a fluent bilingualism is frequently a positive element for successful transculturation (see Colombo et al. 2009; Marsden 2015; Paciocco 2018). Second generation youths who can rely on a differentiated ethnic network, who retain their ability to express themselves effectively both in the language of their ethnic/national group and in the one of the country where they have been ‘socialised’, are more likely to attain educational and professional success (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

This article has sketched out the rationale and methodology for a pilot study for broader projects that may provide a new understanding of the transcultural complexity of Prato and, consequently, of the relationship between Italians and Chinese. Ours is an exploratory piece of research that relates to a rising interest in the transnational dimensions taken by migration processes in a globalised context and advocates the need to rethink the position of our researchers and our modes of engagement with communities.

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### Italian summary

I rapporti dell'Italia con altre nazioni, compresi i rapporti fra Italia e Cina, sono spesso immaginati all'interno di una costruzione binaria che essenzializza la natura delle comunità nazionali e etniche e non rende conto delle complesse ramificazioni transculturali di un mondo sempre più globalizzato. Questo è particolarmente problematico quando si studiano quegli spazi sociali e culturali che Ilaria Vanni (2016) ha descritto come 'transcultural edges'. Questi sono spazi di transizione e incontro fra culture e società diverse; spazi che hanno la potenzialità di creare ecosistemi nuovi, innovativi e produttivi. In questo articolo sosteniamo che uno di questi spazi è Prato, una città industriale vicino Firenze, che è conosciuta per il suo distretto tessile, e in cui vive una delle più grandi comunità cinesi d'Europa. Molti studi accademici si sono concentrati sulla comunità cinese di Prato, compresi molti studi sull'impatto sociale ed economico sulla comunità locale e il suo distretto tessile. La maggior parte di questi studi tende ad isolare la comunità cinese dalla complessità etnica di Prato, all'interno di una cornice binaria che non riconosce la presenza significativa di altri gruppi di migranti, e la reciproca influenza transculturale fra la comunità cinese, quella italiana e gli altri gruppi etnici. Come parte di un progetto più ampio, un gruppo di studiosi intende mappare digitalmente Prato, per includere informazioni quantitative e qualitative geolocalizzate, che vengono raccolte attraverso un metodo interdisciplinare comprendente l'etnografia, l'analisi dei media, gli studi sulla traduzione, gli studi transculturali, e la ricerca digitale partecipativa. Attraverso una breve descrizione degli obiettivi e delle caratteristiche del progetto, l'articolo sostiene l'importanza di ripensare le relazioni fra Italia e Cina, e fra gli italiani e i cinesi, all'interno di un quadro transculturale più complesso e articolato.