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1

The Paradox of Chinese Espresso

COFFEE BARS ARE UBIQUITOUS in urban Italy.¹ They are liberally distributed across all kinds of urban spaces: in piazzas and along sidewalks, in *centri storici* (historic centers) and peripheral *quartieri* (neighborhoods), in both tourist zones and residential areas. And they are found not only in cities, but also in provincial towns and villages. All offer as their most quintessential commodity, Italian-style espresso-based coffees. But unlike Starbucks or other independent specialty coffeehouses in the United States or in China, which focus on coffee consumption, a typical coffee bar in Italy is a hybrid establishment serving as a bar, a convenience store, and often as a game room as well. These are places where urban dwellers, whether native Italians or recent immigrants, can have breakfast, take a break from working or walking, pass their leisure time, or simply use the restroom after buying a bottle of water or a cup of coffee. A coffee bar is also a place where people can meet friends, get up-to-date local news, and enjoy the sense of belonging to a community. The nearly 150,000 *bars*—one for every 400 people—thus constitute a fundamental part of the urban landscape of contemporary Italy and play an integral in the lives of its people.²

Coffee bars were a fresh and foreign cultural experience for me when I was an exchange student writing my Master's thesis in socio-historical linguistics at the University of Trento between 2005 and 2006. It was my first visit to Italy and my first time

outside of China. During my ten-month stay in that Alpine city, I had few interactions with my co-nationals beyond the university circle. They were as mysterious to me—an international student from the same country—as to native Italians. I knew of a clothing shop run by a young Chinese couple close to my dorm, but I never went inside. My Italian friends brought me to a couple of Chinese restaurants, but I did not like their Italianized dishes. I visited Via Paolo Sarpi in Milan and Piazza Vittorio in Rome, both of which were known in Italy for their high concentrations of Chinese residents and their cheap consumer-goods shops and ethnic restaurants. Some Chinese academic friends who had lived in Italy longer than me told me that there were actually many more Chinese residents in Italy. They were immigrant workers hidden in small factories where they both worked and lived and thus became almost invisible to urban dwellers.

Back then, I had never encountered a Chinese barista or heard Italian friends talk about Chinese ownership of coffee bars. I could not even imagine any kind of connection between Chinese immigrants, largely marginalized and detached from Italy's urban life, and the omnipresent coffee bars at the heart of its urban culture. I was astonished when, in 2012, I heard by chance that many coffee bars in Italy had in fact been taken over by Chinese people. This contradicted my own experiences of Italy. My intuition told me that this phenomenon might make for a fascinating ethnographic study for my doctoral dissertation, and I almost immediately decided to pursue research on the topic.

As my project proceeded, I learned that there had been a few sporadic cases of Chinese ownership of coffee bars in Italy in the early 2000s, or even before that. Their rapid spread however coincided with the onset of the Great Recession of 2008. The FIPE's annual reports reveal that since then more coffee bars had closed than were opened each year.³ However, as a counter to these closures, foreign ownership had rapidly expanded in Northern and Central Italy during that same period. In 2008, around 5,000 coffee bars, comprising 6.6 percent of the total number in Italy, were

owned by people who were not born in the country. Ten years later, the percentage had risen to around 10 percent. Among the coffee bars classed as *impresa individuali* or “sole proprietorships,” which is the form of enterprise with the highest level of foreign ownership, some Northern regions reported numbers as high as 20 percent. Over the same period, the numbers of foreign workers had also grown considerably and, by 2018, nearly a quarter of employees in the coffee bar sector were born outside Italy. The Chinese were not the only foreign-born owners of Italian bars. I also encountered coffee bars managed by Russians, Moroccans, and Romanians, among others. But Chinese management was and still is the most visible due to Chinese baristas’ obvious phenotypical differences and their large market share. Coffee bars managed by Chinese people have become quite common in both large cities and provincial towns and in city centers as well as residential areas.

This fact has touched a raw nerve in native Italians who associate the increasing Chinese presence in this niche with the growth of Chinese transnational investment in Italy more broadly. Many Italians express admiration for China, once a poor developing country that has emerged as an economic superpower seemingly almost overnight, while Italy has remained mired in economic stagnation. At the same time, I noticed that even Italians who historically identified with the left often resented China for “buying up” Italy with supposedly problematic money which, in their eyes, was invariably linked to suspicious economic activities or money laundering operations. With few exceptions, both left- and right-wing media have, with remarkable consistency, used provocative headlines and claimed an “invasion” of Chinese capital into the Italian economy.⁴ Their coverage spans the entire range of the Chinese economic presence in Italy, from large companies in the energy industry, banks, and infrastructure sectors, down to small businesses such as coffee bars, restaurants, barbershops, and dollar stores. They share similar concerns about the rapid growth of Chinese enterprises and worries about *i cinesi* (the Chinese)

becoming the *padroni* (bosses) of more and more Italian workers, and maybe one day even the *padrone* (boss) of the entire country. These discourses often equate Chinese people with China in the same racialized category, regardless of the fact that many Chinese residents have lived in Italy for decades and have children who were born or have grown up in Italy.

The anxiety many Italians feel about the supposed loss of Italian culture on this very local level further exacerbates the controversy over Chinese ownership and management of coffee bars. The “coffee bar is not just any place,” a news article claimed.

It has a soul, sometimes very deep roots, and branches that cover the communities of a territory or of a single area. A life, even a very intense one, takes place around the coffee bar, and this is why we can consider the coffee bar as a garrison of relationships, human relations and civility. It is a precious and intangible heritage that we cannot waste or abandon in our daily life.⁵

Alongside its provocative anti-Chinese tone, this article highlights the integral role of coffee bars in shaping Italy’s urban cultures and local identities and argues for resistance to Chinese ownership due to its allegedly alien character. However, the article describes coffee bars in Italy as if they were ahistorical and takes no account of Italians’ diverse class, gender, generation, and other social backgrounds. Like other public discourses I heard and read, it also ignores the increasing foreign-born populations in Italy who today form an important part of the clientele of coffee bars. Like many Italians, these immigrants frequent coffee bars as part of their life style and as a venue for building social relationships.

Another piece published in a local newspaper based in Ravenna, a UNESCO seaside city known for its mosaic art, recounted stories of how two Italian coffee bar owners reacted differently “when China approached.”⁶ The one who sold his business to a Chinese family was described almost as a traitor to his country, despite having expressed his reluctance in the face of a colossal global

power from the “Orient.” The other owner, who refused a Chinese family’s offer, was depicted as a patriot whose rejection of the Chinese buyers was an honorable action taken for the sake of conserving local identity, cultural heritage, and national patrimony. The owner was quoted as saying:

I would rather give up my business to an Italian, even better to someone from the Romagna region. This isn’t an ideological choice, but simply because I want to see my small *bar tabaccheria* [tobacco bar] in the hands of someone familiar, someone who can maintain the characteristic convivial atmosphere of a meeting place for the town.

This owner emphasized the “non-ideological” character of her decision. However, her words were certainly ideologically charged, even racist. Race is a “sliding signifier.”⁷ It is a social and discursive construct invented to justify human differences and inequalities rather than to signify anything inherent in a person’s physical or biological aspect. People of Chinese descent and other East Asians have been historically racialized as perpetual foreigners and unassimilable Others in white-dominant societies, where national identities have always been associated with whiteness.⁸ In this contemporary case, the owner assumed that the Chinese family, unable to understand Italian culture, would not maintain the “authentic” cultural environment of an Italian social space. She made it clear also that people of Chinese descent, regardless of their citizenship, were not Italians in her eyes, as if culture were a geographically bounded and immutable concept. Yet, according to Italian law, only Italian or EU citizens are allowed to purchase tobacco shops, which implies that there was at least one member in that Chinese family who held Italian citizenship.

The owner’s words expressed a common skepticism that many Italians share about Chinese baristas’ ability to manage coffee bars. She mentioned wanting to sell her business to “someone familiar,” on the grounds that local knowledge was critical for maintaining the social functioning of her tobacco bar as a community social

center. This notion is furthered by the social and cultural implications of espresso, the staple commodity of an Italian coffee bar. Together with its variant, cappuccino, espresso is widely considered Italy's national beverage and internationally recognized as a product that is a symbol of *Italianità* (Italian-ness).⁹ How could a person of Chinese descent, who presumably came from a totally alien culture, possibly make an authentic Italian coffee? This is one of the first questions that some curious Italians raise, while others simply pose it as a rhetorical question to which they already know the answer: They cannot.

This controversy and the resistance and skepticism it provokes, however, contradict the reality of Chinese-managed coffee bars and their seemingly convivial atmospheres, as we saw it described in Luca's (Uncle Gumin's) coffee bar in the Prelude. It seems in fact that, despite the racial and ethnic tensions exhibited in heated public discussions and in the media, Chinese baristas have managed to fare quite successfully in intercultural encounters with their local customers. It also appears that Italian consumers, albeit perhaps reluctantly, are getting used to coffee made by Chinese baristas, even while sighing over the "invasion" of the *orientali*.

Chinese Espresso and Convivial Bricolage

This book investigates the conditions, mechanisms, and implications behind the rapid spread of Chinese-managed coffee bars in Northern and Central Italy since the economic downturn of 2008. The project stems from my initial curiosity over why and how Chinese coffee bar owners, supposedly cultural aliens, could manage a business model regarded by Italians as rooted in a distinctively Italian taste and constituting a uniquely Italian social space. I have this puzzle in mind when I refer in this book to the paradox of Chinese Espresso. The two terms initially seem to be mutually exclusive. Espresso coffee is, after all, an Italian national icon. Nevertheless, I use the juxtaposition of the two terms to challenge taken-for-granted perceptions that attach national and cultural at-

tributes to this particular beverage, regardless of its complicated colonial history and current global commodification. Meanwhile, many native Italians and other local populations in Italy have gradually come to regard espresso coffee made by Chinese baristas, as well as Chinese-managed coffee bars, as a new normal. The story of Chinese Espresso is to my mind emblematic of lives in pluralistic, postmodern, and postcolonial urban societies. In this case, racialized immigrants, presumably embodying irreducible and incommensurable cultural differences, nevertheless assume fundamental roles and positions of taste production and place-making that would normally be expected to heavily reward only persons long-rooted in local culture and the national identity. It exposes also the paradox between the apparent multi-racial and multi-ethnic conviviality that prevails in the everyday life of a specific urban space and the hostility against immigrants prevalent in a wider, white-dominant European society.

I see the Chinese Espresso described in this book as a kind of everyday convivial bricolage. The concept of “bricolage,” which denotes the practice of making do with whatever is at hand, has been used by philosophers, cultural theorists, and anthropologists in explaining culture-making and identity formation. Claude Lévi-Strauss first used this concept as a metaphor in *Wild Thought* to depict the ways in which mythical thought, an intellectual process in opposition to scientific thought, is made. He noted that both contingency and inevitable constraints characterize bricolage, to which mythical thought is analogous. They arise because the bricoleurs’ “universe of instruments is closed,” which “restricts their freedom of maneuver.”¹⁰ In this sense, bricolage implies a compromise which “enables the formation of novel systems of meaning.”¹¹ Michel De Certeau further developed this concept in his theory of practice. For him, “bricolage” as “the poetic ways of making do” constitutes a form of social resistance, or “tactics” in his own words, by which common people appropriate, manipulate, and re-use the institutions and structures of power, such as language, place, and social order, in their everyday practices for their own

interests.¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have instead understood bricolage as a mode of desiring-production; all humans, as desiring subjects, are in their view bricoleurs.¹³ Building on these French theorists' interpretations, I define "convivial bricolage" as an interdependent and collaborative social practice by which immigrant subjects cultivate urban conviviality. Chinese Espresso thus produces a collective tapestry woven over time by convivial bricoleurs in their everyday social, cultural, and racial encounters that is characterized by contingency and compromise. This contingency in turn establishes boundaries on the conviviality that they cultivate.

Conviviality is thus central to this book in that it examines how people contrive to live together in an era of unprecedented mobility. The concept of "conviviality"—the art of living together—has its roots in the idealized notion of the *convivència* between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in medieval Iberia. Since the 2010s, this concept has been increasingly used to describe cohabitation and interactions across differences within everyday urban lives.¹⁴ This alluring concept raises fundamental questions about "what constitutes a 'good' society when that society is diverse."¹⁵ In the European scholarship of migration, the concept of "conviviality" serves as both an analytical and methodological tool for understanding social interactions and urban encounters between natives and newcomers in an increasingly heterogeneous Europe.¹⁶ It also represents a kind of "virtuous aspiration" that seeks an alternative to both xenophobic and liberal multiculturalist discourses by imagining social possibilities for more inclusive immigrant reception in Europe.¹⁷ Yet, regardless of its professed ideals, the discourse of conviviality risks downplaying structural inequalities within Europe, all the while reproducing a form of racial discourse that emphasizes cultural harmony and essentialist ideas of difference.¹⁸ In this book, I instead use the concept of conviviality to denote a contingent and situational social reality that resilient immigrant subjects learn to deploy and cultivate to maintain their precarious livelihoods in the face of economic austerity and structural

inequalities. Stepping away from a Eurocentric lens, this book provides a narrative from the immigrants' perspective, exploring how these new city-makers perceive and live within a European society while confronting various forms of difference.¹⁹

In an aging Europe, immigrants participate actively in urban development and in the fashioning of local people's everyday lives. In the case of Italy, some have become caretakers for Italian pensioners within the shifting environment of neoliberal welfare reform, in spite of not being recognized as "ethical citizens."²⁰ Others have undertaken social solidarity initiatives and formed networks for improving local livelihoods and promoting radical political change despite the increasing hostility directed against them.²¹ A large number of newcomers operate market stands or storefront businesses that have transformed the urban landscape and neighborhood life.²² Both established and more recent residents in each of these specific "meeting places" have forged a particular constellation of relationships and understandings that integrate the global and the local.²³ The Chinese-managed coffee bars that are the subject of this study, however, mark a new frontier of immigrant participation in local urban lives, for coffee bars have been construed as central to Italian culture, and in almost all cases they predate Chinese ownership as convivial urban spaces. Yet, quite unexpectedly, it would seem that these purported racial and cultural aliens have managed to preserve the convivial sociality of their establishments.

Coffee bars are first of all a space of economic production. This small-scale business niche, characterized by self-employed family management, is now being passed down along class lines that cross racial and ethnic boundaries. Chinese and other immigrants are incorporated, voluntarily or reluctantly, into this established niche, which offers both laborers and entrepreneurs new opportunities within the globalized labor market regime. Chinese entrepreneurship in Italy's coffee bars also highlights, once again, the fact that kinship, social networks, and other factors typically associated with immigrants' ethnicity and considered crucial in

“traditional” immigrant entrepreneurship still play important roles in the capital and knowledge accumulation that is essential for running this new niche.²⁴ It shows as well that beliefs and values, sentiments and affects, human relations, as well as other non-economic factors, continue to operate as forces that enable, constrain, and shape production, albeit in some new ways.²⁵ In this process, the capitalist production that shapes local taste further integrates immigrant labor in taste-making at the local level, while immigrant subjects in turn “make taste public” through everyday practices in specific premises of sociality.²⁶

Coffee bars are also a space of social relations. They constitute a new form of “contact zone” where local populations, both Italians and immigrants, with their own sets of identities converge, meet, and interact with one another in the course of their everyday social encounters and within the context of “highly asymmetrical relations of power.”²⁷ Like other immigrant subjects in Italy, Chinese baristas demonstrate their own subjectivities rather than appearing merely as disadvantaged social victims who are unilaterally racialized, oppressed, and disempowered within the country’s social reality of structural inequalities and its rigid immigration and citizenship regime.²⁸ They have not only claimed urban space, but have also cultivated their own ways to maintaining and regulating it for their own purposes and aspirations.²⁹ In this process they have, in collaboration with other urban populations, whether considered desirable or not, constructed convivial spaces through the “frictions of encounter.”³⁰

Coffee bars also serve as a crucial terrain in which ordinary people learn, re-envision, and transform racial hierarchies. As a study of regional racial formation in suburban California shows, multi-racial local residents can experience and imagine the multiple proximities that ostensibly blur fixed boundaries.³¹ Those sites of everyday life thus serve as places where local residents develop a particular kind of situated knowledge and form transformative understandings of race, ethnicity, and identity. The Chinese-managed coffee bars that I studied likewise became for

me an instructive global-in-the-local site. I observed how everyday convivial bricolage was produced in practice within a locally embedded social institution, seeking to understand how Chinese baristas perceived, negotiated, and ultimately helped reproduce existing racial formations and hierarchies so as to maintain convivial sociality.

My analysis was also more broadly situated on two larger scales of social context. I looked at Italy as a white-dominant European country experiencing a growing body of anti-immigrant policies, while at the same time confronting several new dilemmas—low fertility rates, an aging population, and increasing immigration, all of which further challenge its mythologies of whiteness and homogeneity.³² Here, I located convivial bricolage in the seemingly contradictory national contexts of population dynamics around culture and race as translated into everyday practice. The third context was our increasingly globalized world, in which recent Chinese diasporas and China's geopolitical and economic rise challenge the white-dominant racial ideology and world order. At this most comprehensive, transnational level, Chinese Espresso emerges as part of a broader web of cultural and racial dynamics.

From these three levels of social context, I endeavored to unravel the paradox of Chinese Espresso around three central ethnographic questions: First: why and how did the espresso believed by many to be quintessentially Italian come to be served increasingly by Chinese baristas in Chinese-owned coffee bars? Second: how were Chinese baristas coming together with other local populations, both native Italians and recent immigrants, with whom they were presumably mutually exclusive socially, to perpetuate an existing form of convivial local culture? Third: how did Chinese baristas in Italy form their own racial understandings in their everyday social encounters with diverse local populations? By focusing on the intersectional production of taste, place, and race, the “biography” of Chinese Espresso that I present in this book thus brings to light the cultural dynamics, immigrant encounters,

and racial formations around everyday places and practices of seemingly little importance.³³

Race, Italian Style

Razza or “race” is not a common topic of discussion in everyday Italy. Many Italians think of race as an American fixation or “problem.” I have rarely heard Italians use words like *bianco* (white) or *nero* (black) to describe people in the same way as we hear them used in the United States, although the perception that Italians are white is in the ascendent in Italian rhetoric nowadays.³⁴ Instead, *cultura* or “culture” is the preferred concept that native Italians use to talk about difference. Yet, while avoiding the taboo of speaking of race, this “culture” discourse does not prevent native Italians from noticing race and categorizing *italiani* and *immigrati* along classic racial lines.³⁵ It would, therefore, be fair to say that Italy’s racial formations conflate culture, nation, and race.³⁶ Immigration is “par excellence, the name of race.”³⁷ The widespread discourses of cultural differences between *italiani* and *immigrati* serve to explain social inequalities as the result of biological differences rather than structural inequalities.³⁸ They function to legitimate and justify perceptions of recent immigrants as more backward and less civilized. This form of racism provides an ideological device that neatly harmonizes with populist discourses and alarmist rhetoric that warn of dangers inherent in the erosion of national and cultural boundaries by *stranieri* or “foreigners.”³⁹

This colonial evolutionary notion of culture, embedded in Eurocentric liberal values of progress, modernity, and rationality, has contributed to the historical production of racism in Italy.⁴⁰ Despite its inclusionary promises of Enlightenment and humanism, such a liberal system of values has its roots in white supremacy and racism directed against non-white populations. The Italian state claims itself to be a “cultural power,” celebrated for centuries with artistic superlatives and this notion of “cultural power” is the very logic that has structured modern Italy as a nation-state.⁴¹ In

this context, native Italians celebrate as common sense the idea that *la cultura italiana* or “Italian culture” is built upon the ancient and venerable Roman foundations that gave birth to European civilization and enabled the Renaissance. In her ethnographic project on the Freemasons in contemporary Italy, anthropologist Lilith Mahmud reveals that the dominant discourse of *cultura*, in the sense of high culture, reified the inheritable nature of culture, maintaining that it was inculcated by family and home, rather than achievable through formal educational training such as might be available to anyone.⁴² This preserves systems of distinction based on the social and cultural capital of the usually white Italian family. In the same vein, media reports and popular discourses often describe the low birth rate of native Italians in contrast to the higher birth rates of recent immigrants as a “crisis” and spread panic about the demise of the Italian “race” and European culture generally.⁴³ An ethnographic study of the Italian transnational fashion industry in China presents another clear example of how this logic functions in the real world. The study found that Italian managers perceived *italianità* as “intuitive, a result of growing up in Italy,” something that was culturally conditioned and could not be taught in a classroom.⁴⁴

As Italy sought to construct *italianità* as connoting racial, cultural, and moral superiority, its external colonies and the Italian South became the first metaphorical and symbolic representations of Italy’s marginal and racial Others.⁴⁵ Both Italy’s liberal and fascist regimes launched a series of imperialist projects in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and the Balkans, which aimed to bring Italy into the company of the wealthier, more industrialized, and more powerful European nations. Having colonies was seen as a fundamental feature of Europeaness and therefore modernity in the colonial logic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁶ In addition, colonization abroad would, it was thought, help to flatten Italy’s internal differences based on race, class, and gender, as “Italians united as nationals and as Europeans” against their colonies and the colonized Others.⁴⁷

At the same time, internal Orientalist tropes associated Southern Italy with images of clientelism, corruption, crime, and backwardness.⁴⁸ Southern Italy became a sort of imagined colonized subject. It was often referred to as “Africa,” and Southerners were “Africans” or “Moroccans.” Colonial Africa thus served as a “governing metaphor” through which it was possible to make sense of Southern Italy as well.⁴⁹ Documentaries and newsreels of the 1970s often described internal migrants from Southern Italy to the more developed North as *immigrati*, as if Southern Italians were in fact foreigners from outside the national borders.

Italy’s history of colonialism was largely erased or at least obfuscated in post-WWII Italian national culture.⁵⁰ In broad consensus, political conservatives, liberals, and even communists rewrote Italy’s colonial and fascist history emphasizing its anti-fascist tradition, insisting that fascism was only a historical aberration in the country’s long liberal and humanist tradition.⁵¹ The construction of *italianità* thus centered on a positive image of the Italians as *brava gente*, “good, kind people,” who were to be viewed in the collective memory as victims of war and fascism.⁵² The combination of denial with a sort of alleged kindness and humanity that underlay this rewriting has not only covered up Italy’s brutal colonial regime in its African colonies and downplayed the country’s fascist history, but has also provided a cultural justification for ignoring and denying the escalating racism against non-white residents in contemporary Italy.⁵³

Since the mid-1970s, millions of new arrivals, both immigrants and refugees, from over one hundred countries have settled in Italy, especially in the Northern industrial districts, where they satisfy an increasing demand for flexible and low-cost labor. Nowadays, Italy hosts one of the most diverse foreign populations in Europe, even as the country has gradually become less attractive to certain immigrants due to the enduring economic recession that began in 2008.⁵⁴ These newcomers, mainly “different” in appearance and religious and cultural practices, have “naturally” replaced Southerners and have become new “problems” in the Italian na-

tionalist discourse. A new nationalist rhetoric has re-cast pre-1980 Italy as a racially and ethnically homogenous nation-state, as if the racialization of Southern Italians had never occurred. New racial fault-lines further facilitate the scapegoating of *immigrati* as responsible for the economic recession of 2008 and the subsequent austerity, while disempowering and breaking up the working class from below.⁵⁵

The growing anti-immigrant and populist rhetoric often assumes that newcomers “from outside the racially circumscribed national ‘community’” have a natural bent toward criminality.⁵⁶ They are presumed to be members of mafia-like underground organizations that endanger public security and ultimately erode the Italian national identity. For instance, the term *marocchini*, which originally denoted people from Morocco, has had its meaning extended as a racial pejorative that signifies North Africans more broadly and has come to be associated with drug dealing and crime.⁵⁷ Discourses on drugs and prostitution, once seen as harms brought by Southerners, are now cast as something non-Italian in nature. Pervasive stereotypes of immigrant criminality highlight a commitment to law as a new national identity differentiating Italians from *immigrati*.⁵⁸ As postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy has suggested, the law as a national institution “symbolizes the imagined community of the nation and expresses the fundamental unity and equality of its citizens.”⁵⁹

Italy’s restrictive immigration and citizenship policies at both the national and local levels have also contributed directly to the social exclusion of recent immigrants.⁶⁰ Its legislative regime that regulates entries of immigrants through predefined quotas and specific sponsorship by the employers has proved to be ineffective, as most of these newcomers work in small family businesses, or as seasonal or occasional workers in Italy’s vast array of informal economies.⁶¹ Large numbers of undocumented immigrants thus entered Italy with a tourist visa or illegally. To obtain a *permesso di soggiorno* (residence permit), however, one needs to have a labor contract for regular employment. The link between a residence

permit and a labor contract thus further limits the opportunities of foreign workers, forcing them to remain in what are most often subordinate positions within informal labor markets. While earlier immigrants could still rely on the periodic amnesties offered up until 2012 to legalize their residency, many more recent comers find themselves trapped in criminal networks.⁶² Earlier in the 1990s, Marzio Barbagli's research suggests that the significant increase of criminal cases committed by immigrants in Italy was also connected to the difficult social realities and "relative deprivation" that they faced.⁶³ Italy's policies on naturalization are in fact among the most restrictive in the European Union. People who can prove that they have an Italian ancestor who emigrated from Italy after Italian Unification (1861–1870) have the right to claim Italian citizenship immediately. In contrast, a citizen from a country outside of the EU must prove ten years of uninterrupted legal residence in Italy and in addition pass a language exam to qualify for citizenship. Italian-born children of foreign citizens must go through the same naturalization process to obtain Italian citizenship, and the application has to be submitted within a year of their reaching the age of eighteen. Terms for hyphenated identities, such as *sino-italiano* (Chinese-Italian) that correspond to "Chinese-American" in the United States have only just begun to be used in some progressive and activist circles in recent years and are not in general use throughout the country.

Italy's problematization of immigrants is also related in part to the project of defending "Fortress Europe," a term that symbolizes the European Union's wider border control regime.⁶⁴ Protecting Italians from non-white immigrants demonstrates Italy's compliance with this objective.⁶⁵ The word *extracomunitari* (extracommunitarians or non-EU members), initially used by the EU legislative bureaucracy to refer to individuals coming from countries not belonging to the EU, has become an ambiguous term to denote those who are "outside the community" in its more literal sense.⁶⁶ It is now a stigmatizing social label that implies the social exclusion of non-white immigrants from countries outside of the

EU. White Swiss and Americans are never labeled *extracomunitari*, even though neither Switzerland nor the United States belongs to the EU. People of different nationalities among the *extracomunitari* are further labeled, grouped, and differentially categorized based on fixed stereotypes.⁶⁷ Some are more integrated, some more trustworthy, others are more dangerous, and still others are more hardworking. However, unlike the United States, Italy has no stereotypical concept of a “model minority.”

China is the third most common country of origin of non-EU residents in Italy, after Morocco and Albania.⁶⁸ Chinese residents, seen as both physically and culturally distinct from native Italians, are firmly categorized as *extracomunitari*. Indeed, the entire history of Chinese migration to Italy demonstrates “persistent racism” against Chinese people.⁶⁹ While the term *i cinesi* tends to racialize the entire Chinese population and erase internal differences within their ranks, the racialization of Chinese residents has its own peculiar features. Native Italians often describe Chinese workers or small entrepreneurs in the service industry as *simpatici* (nice, friendly), smiling, and hardworking, qualities regarded as typically *orientali*. Yet, the same Italians may also believe that Chinese entrepreneurship, with its visibly growing economic power in Italy, must have been achieved through unfair competition and underground *trucchi* (tricks) that often sacrifice quality and involve counterfeiting, thereby destroying local economies. Money laundering, tax evasion, and *lavoro nero* (unreported employment) are also typically charged against Chinese entrepreneurs. In contrast to the label “Made in Italy,” which signifies good quality, *prodotti cinesi* or “Chinese products” are synonymous with low-quality merchandise. A neighborhood with highly visible Chinese populations, workshops, restaurants, shops, and other ethnic businesses in Prato—a Tuscan textile city and a center of the “Made in Italy” fast fashion industry—has become a ghetto-like “Chinatown” in the eyes of local *pratesi* and a “Chinese problem” to be “fixed” if the city is to maintain its *italianità*.⁷⁰ There, Chinese residents face a hostile social climate, negative and racist portrayals

in the local media and from native Italians, as well as a range of everyday forms of racism and marginalization.⁷¹

As an Italian anthropologist friend of mine sarcastically commented, “One Chinese is exotic; many Chinese are immigrants.” But, no matter whether one or many, no matter their citizenship, and no matter how attached they might be to Italy, the racialized Chinese are “matter out of place” in Mary Douglas’s phrase.⁷² The Italian Orientalist gaze perceives China as culturally formidable, economically ambitious, and geopolitically threatening, and people of Chinese descent as unassimilable. Such perceptions fit comfortably within broader anti-immigrant and nationalist discourses on cultural differences and immigration problems. Meanwhile, over the past four decades, Chinese residents have become one of the most prosperous and economically powerful ethnic and immigrant groups in Italy. The increasing number of “Oriental” faces as well as their products and their storefront enterprises are so visible as to constitute an integral part of the urban landscape and urban life. This development, which is part and parcel of China’s rise as a global economic power, looks like a countercurrent to Italy’s chronic economic stagnation. In the populist-nationalist discourse, “China’s threat” has now taken on a new guise that merges admiration and resentment.

New Frontiers of Chinese Migration

The well-known Chinese TV drama series *Wenzhou Yi Jia Ren* (literally, “A Wenzhou Family”), broadcast by China Central Television in 2012, tells the story of a family from the rural Wenzhou region of southern Zhejiang Province on the southeast coast of China. 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. The series tells a “Legend of Entrepreneurship” (which is also the drama’s English title) that 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. Indeed, the rural hinterlands of southern Zhejiang, including Wenzhou and its neighboring Qingtian County, are the places of origin of most Chinese baristas in Italy.⁷³

There is a reason why this Chinese TV drama chose a Wenzhou story to exemplify "rising up." People from Wenzhou are well-known within China as migrant merchants, traders, and artisans. Due to environmental and socioeconomic circumstances, Wenzhou generated numerous surplus agricultural laborers who were historically engaged in migratory labor and mercantile activities, a trend that was only briefly disrupted during the Maoist era. When China's state policy turned towards a market economy in 1978, Wenzhou was the first area to react by embracing a privatized economy, which later was dubbed the "Wenzhou Model."⁷⁴ Numerous migrants from the hinterlands of Southern Zhejiang became a "floating population" in search of employment and business opportunities and established migrant settlements in China's urban centers.⁷⁵ Many others, encouraged by both central and local government policies, instead reached Europe and other parts of the world where they sought new economic trajectories.⁷⁶ Kinship and native-place networks, crucial for many other migrant groups as well, are their primary means for organizing their travels, economic activities, and social lives.⁷⁷ Through wide-ranging transnational networks, they are able to occupy economic niches that fit into the local ecologies of their destinations, from *baihuo* shops in Cape Verde, to wholesale markets in Brazil, and from coffee bars in Italy to lingerie shops in Egypt.⁷⁸

The recent Chinese arrivals with whom I spoke are aware of the region's reputation for emigration and small-scale entrepreneurship. They often emphasize and take pride in their supposed cosmopolitan sensibility that is associated with their regional identity as merchants. As people from there often claim, "we," Wenzhouese

(or sometimes more generally Zhejiangese) “go wherever there is business,” and we are able to “do business with anyone” and to “manage any business.” This claim echoes Li Zhang’s ethnographic study of Wenzhou migrants in Beijing in the 1990s.⁷⁹ While long-time urbanites in Beijing categorized rural migrants as a “floating population” and described them as dirty, uncivil, provincial, and backwards, Wenzhou migrants highlighted their flexibility, self-reliance, industriousness, vitality, determination, and bravery. All these self-identified positive qualities, as Li Zhang argued, served as a counter-discourse on urban belonging that transcended a fixed locality and allowed them to self-fashion spatial mobility as a way of life, while drawing boundaries from other urbanites.

For my Chinese interlocutors from Southern Zhejiang, baristas or not, the coffee bar business was nothing special, simply one of many small enterprises through which their families were able to *zhuangqian* (make money) in Italy and elsewhere. But, if we look back at the modern history of emigration from China, a cosmopolitan sensibility was by no means unique to people from Wenzhou. The model of entrepreneurial migration was typical of people from three *qiaoxiang* (emigrants’ hometowns) provinces—Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong—all on the southeast coast of China.⁸⁰ In these areas, petty capitalism has historically been what historian Hill Gates has referred to as “China’s motor” for both the state and the society.⁸¹ Numerous rural laborers from these *qiaoxiang* left voluntarily or were forced to leave their homes and seek a living as *huagong* (Chinese laborers) or *huashang* (Chinese merchants) in other parts of the world.⁸² These Chinese emigrants developed economic niches in colonial Southeast Asia beginning in the 1500s, in the settler-colonial societies of the Americas and Australasia by the mid-1800s, and more recently in Europe in the early twentieth century.⁸³

Unlike the “old” emigrants, “new” Chinese emigrants—those who arrived after 1978—are inextricably linked to China’s growing participation in the global economy. The Chinese managers and entrepreneurs who today are involved in the transnational capital-

ism of fast fashion in China like to highlight their cosmopolitanism or “worldly knowledge,” which “encompasses their abilities to transcend culture to embrace the seemingly universal aspects of capitalist business practices.”⁸⁴ More than describing a business strategy, this discourse provides a cultural explanation for the economic success of both Chinese emigrants and of China itself as a rising economic power. It reveals a newfound cultural confidence that Chinese entrepreneurs feel in their ability to navigate global capitalism. Yet, one thing is missing from this cultural explanation. It does not yet give us a broader structural perspective in which to contextualize the international mobility of labor amid economic globalization and global capitalism.⁸⁵

Chinese emigrants, mostly laborers and merchants, have participated in developing a global trading and production system alongside European colonialists’ global expansion since the sixteenth century. Like other international migrations from the Global South, the “new” Chinese mass emigration after 1978 was also a response to the receiving societies’ declining fertility and the presence of segmented labor markets in which immigrants could be employed.⁸⁶ While many aspired to become entrepreneurs, these migrants were first of all laborers in pursuit of better economic opportunities through transnational mobility.⁸⁷

Chinese and other migrant businesses are certainly not “new.” They have, however, become increasingly noticeable in Italian and other European cities that have experienced mass immigration since the 1980s. What is new in the Chinese-run coffee bar business in Italy is that, as a racialized immigrant group, Chinese labor is fitting itself into an existing “traditional” niche at the core of Italian culture, which was previously occupied by native Italian merchants and laborers. Indeed, in an unprecedented step in the history of outward Chinese migration, these Chinese laborers and merchants can neither reliably use Chinese identity as a selling point, nor depend on Chinese manufacturing and supply chains to market cheap products. And this is not just happening in Italy. The phenomenon of Chinese entrepreneurs submerging their ethnic

identity in order to pursue a business niche predicated on reproducing a local commodity culture and selling local taste to local populations is also occurring in Spain, France, the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Western Europe.⁸⁸

The tale of Chinese Espresso also marks a new chapter in the story of “Chinese among others,” to echo historian Philipp Kuhn in his book that extensively explores Chinese emigrants’ experiences, hopes, and sorrows around the world.⁸⁹ In this global history some Chinese laborers and merchants strove to make a living and survive hostility from host societies through residential segregation and in ethnic enclaves, such as with the many US Chinatowns.⁹⁰ Others acted as “middleman minorities” providing goods and services to marginalized racial and ethnic groups, typically in poor neighborhoods.⁹¹ A clear social boundary was thus drawn between themselves and other ethnic groups, towards whom they held negative and prejudicial attitudes. A typical coffee bar in Italy by contrast is neither an enclave business nor a middleman minority niche. It is a fundamental and long-established urban social space and a “traditional” food sector, where Chinese baristas must leverage all of their “integration capital” to connect, interact, and live with others, willingly or reluctantly.⁹²

Yet, like middleman minorities and other Chinese shopkeepers in poorer countries across the globe, Chinese baristas in Italy also face the predicament of being simultaneously economically privileged and socially vulnerable.⁹³ Their economic privilege often coexists with legal and political vulnerability, as shown in an ethnographic study of the moral struggles between street-level bureaucrats and Chinese residents in Tanzania.⁹⁴ In South Africa, Chinese residents have become targets of both a corrupt state and common criminals, while they ambiguously shift between the identities of whiteness and blackness.⁹⁵ In the United States, Chinese and other Asian Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have long confronted anti-Asian racism and even violence aimed at them. And, as many studies show, racial tensions also exist between Asians and other disadvantaged American racial groups.⁹⁶

The ambiguous power dynamics that Chinese baristas face in Italy are contextualized within a white-dominant country that has undergone a change in its demographic composition as a result of various forms of migration.⁹⁷ Racial encounters between Chinese immigrants and the dominant white Italian population are complicated by South-South encounters. Thus, the story of Chinese baristas producing an Italian nationalist commodity while preserving a distinctly Italian social space goes beyond a Eurocentric narrative about immigrant-host relations or a European society's reception of immigrants. This new narrative further complicates our understanding of racial formation within the shifting racial landscapes and realities of the Global North, in which an immigrant group, themselves subject to racialization, in turn racialize other groups.

Bologna as an Ethnographic Context

I visited Bologna several times during my exchange program in Trento. As a tourist, I was amazed by the city's well-preserved *centro storico* with its two medieval towers rising into the blue sky and its seemingly endless porticoes and eye-catching red rooftops. I was drawn to it as well as the site of the University of Bologna, the oldest university in the Western world. As a student from China, Bologna had another attraction for me, however, one that had nothing to do with what I read in my *Lonely Planet* travel guide. There was a Chinese grocery store just a fifteen-minute-walk from the railway station, and this became a must-go destination for me whenever I passed by Bologna by train. After I embarked upon this project for my Ph.D. dissertation, I learned that the *quartiere* just outside the *centro storico* where the Chinese grocer was located was called Bolognina or "little Bologna." It is notorious for its higher concentration of people with migrant backgrounds, including Chinese. Chinese speakers themselves refer to two long streets passing through this area as *zhongguo jie* (Chinese Streets) due to the high concentration of Chinese storefronts and residents found there.

What is not widely known among younger *bolognesi* is that there have been Chinese people living in the city since the 1920s. Local legends like that of the Sun family and their gas company Sun Gas, which was founded in the 1950s and provided residential gas, are now only conversation pieces, sometimes mentioned when elderly *bolognesi* recall their early, curious peeks into the city's mysterious *comunità cinese* (Chinese community).⁹⁸ The current Chinese population in Bologna, as in other parts of Italy, has its origins primarily in the mass migration from China that began in the mid-1980s. Registered Chinese citizens in the city of Bologna increased from 269 in 1986 to nearly 4,000 in 2016.⁹⁹ Most early comers worked in the textile manufacturing sector, but more recently a large number have moved to restaurants and other service industries, including coffee bars, and have relocated their homes nearer to their workplaces. Although the number of Chinese residents in Bologna is not particularly large, their presence in the city has become increasingly visible, alongside other non-white populations, due to their active engagement in the commercial and service industries that spread across the city.

A major urban center for centuries, Bologna is the seventh most populous city in Italy with a population of nearly 400,000 and a greater metropolitan area that hosts around one million inhabitants.¹⁰⁰ Its vigorous service-sector economy and the dynamic small enterprises in the industrial districts of surrounding areas, which are considered a core component of the so-called "Third Italy," have recruited numerous laborers from outside the area since the post-war era.¹⁰¹ Indeed, Bologna is a city of migrants. By 2011, two-thirds of the registered residents of the city had some sort of migrant background, either domestic or from abroad.¹⁰² The city was in fact one of the major destinations for internal mass migration from rural areas and from Southern Italy during the post-war economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s. More immigrants arrived in the mid- to late 1980s, and by 2016, the number of registered foreign citizens reached nearly 60,000 or 15 percent of the Bologna's population. Most came from Eastern Europe, North Africa, South

Asia, the Philippines, and China.¹⁰³ These more recent immigrants, like the earlier internal migrant workers, typically worked as either low-wage laborers or were self-employed small entrepreneurs in this aging, post-industrial city, where the local population was in demographic decline.¹⁰⁴

Bologna is also known by a nickname, *la rossa* or “the Red,” due originally to its many red brick towers and buildings. That moniker took on an additional red political connotation in the twentieth century, as Bologna was run by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) from the end of the war until the party’s dissolution in 1991.¹⁰⁵ Even in the 2018 and 2022 general elections, Bologna was one of the few electoral districts in which the center-left coalition, defeated nationally, was able to eke out a victory. This strong leftist tradition, however, has not spared newcomers from the effects of racism. David Kertzer’s ethnographic study of a poor *quartiere* in Bologna during the 1970s shows that sentiments against Southern Italians, the major *immigrati* at that period, were strong enough to bridge the political schism between the Catholic Church and the Communist Party, thereby helping to promote a collective identity for Northerners.¹⁰⁶ Davide Però’s study also reveals that while Bologna’s left-leaning municipal administration often showcased the city as exemplary of their innovative, progressive, and inclusionary social policies toward materially disadvantaged and culturally marginalized people, including immigrants, these policies are not as supportive of integration and multiculturalism as their reputation might suggest.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Bruno Riccio’s study of Senegalese immigrants in Emilia-Romagna exposes the ambiguous immigration policies that operate there under a logic of closure and exclusion, even while the region claims to recognize the rights of newcomers.¹⁰⁸

I chose Bologna as my field site specifically because its demographic, economic, and political contexts were well suited to an exploration of my primary interest; namely conviviality. More specifically, I wanted to learn how Chinese residents managed to live together with Italian and other local populations rather than in

relative segregation. Like other cities across Northern and Central Italy, Bologna had experienced striking growth in the number of its foreign-owned coffee bars. The number reached 461 in 2011, taking in more than 16 percent of the 2,852 coffee bars operating in metropolitan Bologna that year. This percentage is higher than the national average (10.2 percent), but consistent with that in other regions in Northern and Central Italy.¹⁰⁹ While no available official statistics on the total number of Chinese ownerships is available, the Statistics Office at Bologna's Chamber of Commerce recorded that in 2014 half of the foreign-born "sole proprietorship" coffee bars were Chinese-owned. When I began my fieldwork in the same year, my estimate of the total number of Chinese-owned coffee bars was between 200 and 300, comprising ten percent of the total coffee bars in metropolitan Bologna.¹¹⁰ And Chinese coffee bar ownership continued to increase until the Covid-19 pandemic. Some Chinese-owned establishments are located at the heart of Bologna's *centro storico*, where they target tourists and street shoppers and rely on their white employees to advertise their quality. Some are in the city's affluent neighborhoods and serve sophisticated drinks to well-off professionals. Still others are located in the university area and sell cheap alcoholic drinks to hard-pressed college students. I noticed, however, that most Chinese-owned coffee bars are *bar tradizionali* (traditional bars) located in working-class neighborhoods, in urban peripheries, and in provincial towns. Although other urban dwellers do stop or may even have their daily coffee rituals there, the patrons of these coffee bars are primarily marginalized people, including working-class men of different generations who often have migrant backgrounds both from within Italy and from beyond its national borders.

My ethnographic journey in Bologna started with fourteen months of intensive fieldwork between May 2014 and July 2015, and then continued in short annual visits that were only interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹¹ No longer a passerby, I explored emotions and relationships in the city and made myself live as a part of these discoveries. I established personal connections



FIGURE 1.1. A bar sign under Bologna's famous porticoes. Note the "T" in the back advertising that this establishment also sells tobacco products. (Photograph by author)

with many people, most of whom lived at the margins of society and whose everyday lives in no way resembled *la dolce vita* (the sweet life) that many foreign tourists like to imagine. Despite having been in Italy for many years or even their entire lives, the people whom I typically came to know in Chinese-managed coffee bars, whether they were owners or customers, had seen very little of this *Bel Paese* (the Beautiful Country, one of Italy's nicknames) and experienced Italy as something far less romantic and pleasant than the Italy foreign tourists enjoyed. These local inhabitants were often stuck in a street-corner bar, where they spent the bulk of their working, and even leisure hours either making or drinking Chinese Espresso, day after day. This ethnographic journey in Bologna thus became also my own quest to demystify the imaginary "destination Italy" that was and still is so deeply linked to a romanticized past with "a strong reputation for resisting commodification through historical preservation, artisanal craftsmanship, espresso hegemony, and the like."¹¹² It is an Italy that is intensely involved in globalization, just like most countries and regions throughout the world.

Ethnographer, Barista, and Bricoleur

As an anthropologist, I ask structural questions about the forces that undergird the social and cultural complexity of humans as they go through seemingly banal and trivial everyday experiences, and I try to make sense of these using my "sociological imagination."¹¹³ Throughout the whole period of my intensive fieldwork, primarily in Bologna, I visited more than one hundred coffee bars, about sixty of which were owned and managed by Chinese people. As a young woman, I followed the local gendered social norms when I entered a coffee bar alone as a customer (more about this in Chapter Three). During those five or ten minutes of drinking a coffee or some other non-alcoholic beverage, I often initiated conversations with the barista. In this way, I could gain a general idea about the place, experience the whole

process of the service, observe the composition of the customers, and in some cases hear stories about the coffee bar. However, it was almost impossible for me to simply sit with a cup of coffee for hours to observe the activities of the baristas and their customers, as few of them were a place like Starbucks where college students or young professionals could connect to Wi-Fi and sit alone with their laptops for hours.

When I had established a certain trust and built a relationship with the Chinese baristas and their families, their coffee bars became somewhat more accessible for my intensive fieldwork. I was able to regularly visit eight Chinese-owned coffee bars where I engaged with the Chinese baristas and their customers, either for at least two months or even throughout my entire fieldwork. Due to my Chinese appearance, some customers thought I was a friend or a relative of the family, or even a “girlfriend” when the barista was a young man. While consuming my drinks (in many cases offered for free by the Chinese owners), I watched how coffees and other products were produced and served. I observed interactions between Chinese baristas and their customers, and between customers from diverse social backgrounds. I also took opportunities to chat with the baristas when they were not serving their clientele. We spoke in Mandarin Chinese or Italian, depending on the Chinese baristas’ preference. Our conversations were often interrupted by customers who joined our chats to give an opinion, make a joke, or just exchange some words of greeting. Similar to the experiences of Jane Cowan, who conducted research on gendered everyday sociability in the coffee bars of a Northern Greek town, I also made unexpected discoveries “after sharing endless cups of coffee,” and I too often felt myself enmeshed in the “meanings and reciprocities” of such sociability.¹¹⁴ To maintain the authentic vibe of our interactions, I decided not to record any conversations that happened at the bar counter. My only recordings were of one-on-one conversations where I sat down with my interlocutors in a more formal interview setting. I did take notes or simply jotted down key words on my smartphone during

the intervals between our interactions, and then once I returned home, wrote more complete accounts of the day's observations. Quite often I also showed the notes to my interlocutors to confirm what they had said and what they meant.

In December 2014, I got a chance to move even closer to my subject matter. For four months I served as an informal and unpaid apprentice barista. In effect, I was transformed from a mere "participant observer" to an active "observing participant."¹¹⁵ Apprenticeship was "both a mode of learning and a field method" that opened another door to ethnographic understanding.¹¹⁶ It allowed me to gain first-hand knowledge about how Chinese baristas learned the manual skills needed to produce a local taste recognized as familiar by their diverse customers, and how they viewed their work and developed their business and management strategies. The experience also enabled me to build a closer relationship with the Chinese owner's family, as well as with other Chinese baristas, with whom I could share and discuss barista skills and from whom I could learn something about coffee bar management. Working as a barista further allowed me to interact directly with customers, build up a new type of relationship with them, and experience intercultural encounters.

I became part of a community that would serve my ethnographic goals by providing an instructive conceptual framework within which I could examine the ways in which established residents and newcomers convened at a very local level within a national border.¹¹⁷ The coffee bars were first of all a sensory field where I engaged in an embodied sensory investigation of Chinese baristas' labor skills of taste-making.¹¹⁸ They offered also an analytical social field at the intersection between a core local institution and an international migration. In short, I had found a productive setting for an investigation into conviviality and diversity. I was ready now to follow earlier ethnographies of encounters by giving attention to the "interactive and unequal dynamics of power that shape culture-making across relationships of difference" rather than merely focusing on "a single population or cultural group."¹¹⁹

(continued...)

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