

Migration and the Media: Debating Chinese Migration to Italy, 1992–2012

by Gaoheng Zhang, Toronto, Buffalo, and London, University of Toronto Press, 2019, xi + 281 pp., \$76.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4426-3043-7.

Maria Elena Indelicato

University of Coimbra, Portugal

Email: mariaelenaindelicato@ces.uc.pt

Migration and the Media constitutes a methodologically well-crafted study of four major media debates concerning Chinese migrants in Italy at the onset of globalisation. In this regard, it is less about Chinese migrants themselves than about Italy's socio-cultural and economic repositioning vis-à-vis increased migration to the country and loss of competitiveness in the dynamic international economic order of 1992–2012. Tensions between local and global identities and economic interests are indeed duly factored in by Zhang's study and employed to explain why Chinese migrants, and not any other migrant group, were those who captured the imagination of Italian politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs and ordinary (white) citizens at a time of great changes. As the author explains, in contrast to the other migrant communities in Italy, Chinese migrants were the only ones who could concomitantly stand for the global economic ascendancy of China, the crisis of the world-renowned small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) industrial model of Italy and, finally, migrant integration in the national economy.

As Zhang convincingly argues throughout the book, the tensions between local and global identities and economic interests also constituted the two major frameworks that were used to write about Chinese migrants from 1992 to 2012. Naming these frameworks Italian-migrant and local-global dynamics, respectively, the author applies them to examine three main phases of the representation of Chinese migrants in the Italian media. According to Zhang, the first phase started around 1992, when, amid daily reports of widespread political corruption and the Italian mafia, the Italian media started to accuse Chinese migrants, without foundation, of having brought the Chinese mafia into Italy. The second phase started around 2006–7, when the Italian media started focusing on Chinese migration as an economic phenomenon. The third phase started in 2012, when the Italian media began characterising Chinese migrants as fellow Italian residents.

After contextualising Chinese migration in Italy and the socio-political exclusion of migrants in general in the first chapter, Zhang devotes the second one to the examination of the 'Chinese mafia' metaphor. As the author explains, Italian journalists had adopted it to report about Chinese illegal migration practices (i.e., people smuggling) because of their propensity to report on migration through a 'criminological lens', and their exposure to the genres of crime reporting and fiction. Despite its popularity, the use of the Chinese mafia metaphor came to a halt in the early 2000s, when both police investigations and sociological studies ascertained that no form of international criminal organisation was behind Chinese migration. Nonetheless, as Zhang observes, since all parties involved in the debate, including the Italian journalists and elite Chinese migrants who defended Chinese migrants, had likened Chinese illegal migration practices to 'a specific set of bounded (cultural) traits' (p. 47), the debate introduced 'ethnocultural essentialism' as

a rhetorical strategy to highlight either the undesirability or desirability of Chinese migrants in Italy.

Building on this insight, the third and fourth chapter examine the heated debate that followed the so-called 'Chinatown Riot' in Via Sarpi, Milan, in 2007. As Zhang observes, while the riot was spurred by local residents' complaints against Chinese merchants' practices of double parking and transporting merchandise with pushcarts, the public debate that ensued was focused on the economic invasion and encroachment on the Italian identity that Chinese migrants were alleged to cause. As a result, the Italian journalists and Chinese elite migrants who defended the Chinese migrants' resistance to being disciplined via the copious administration of fines, advocated shifting the perception of migrants' social integration from a matter of public security to one of implementing multicultural policies that guaranteed wider political participation and representation of migrants in general.

Following up on the accusation of economic invasion, which conflated Chinese migrants' capital with mainland China's, the fifth and sixth chapter survey the long debate that followed the police raids on warehouses owned by Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato, from 2005 to 2009. As with the enforcement of fines on Chinese merchants in Via Sarpi, the police raids in Prato constituted the attempt by local authorities to assuage local entrepreneurs' anxieties concerning their loss of global competitiveness. In these chapters, Zhang masterfully unfolds the post-Second World War history of the textile and garment industry in Prato, detailing why and how the Chinese entrepreneurs came to dominate this industry in the 2000s. The author also competently describes the local authorities' complex response to the requests by local entrepreneurs for disciplinary actions against Chinese entrepreneurs' illegal business practices, and the consequent adoption of Chinese-Italian collaboration to salvage the 'Made in Italy' brand worldwide. In so doing, Zhang, once more, shows how the perceived encroachment on the Italian economy and identity by Chinese migrants (and Mainland China) was resolved by augmenting their social integration at the local level.

Departing from economic concerns, the last chapter examines the march that Chinese migrants effectively organised in 2012 following the brutal murder of a Chinese entrepreneur and his six-month-old daughter in Rome. As Zhang observes, the march represented a watershed moment in Italian media coverage of migration but also in the activism of Chinese migrants. For the author, this was the case because the brutal murder occurred amidst rising criminality in Rome and the inability of local authorities to secure public safety for all Romans. Given this context, Chinese activists skilfully mustered their fellow Romans' sympathy and successfully positioned the whole Chinese community as potential victims of random urban crimes. This turned out to be effective, leading the Italian media to finally include Chinese migrants as fellow Italian residents equally entitled to state protection.

Overall, *Migration and the Media* represents a very accurate study of media discourse concerning the responses of Italians to challenges posed by globalisation and migration. In this regard, although it also sheds light on the rhetorical strategies Chinese migrant elites employed to defend the social standing and economic interests of their community, its thesis differs greatly from contemporary studies of Chinese migration in North America, in which the economic threat that Chinese migrants are perceived to pose is more straightforwardly theorised as a matter of race.