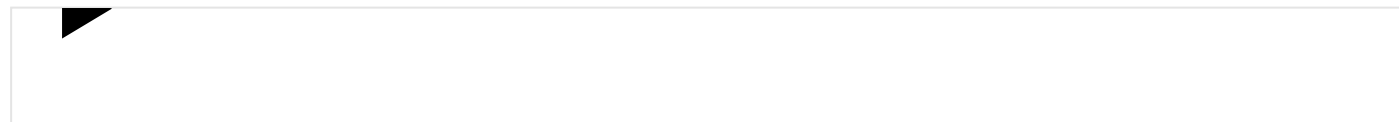


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# THE CHINESE WORKERS WHO ASSEMBLE DESIGNER BAGS IN TUSCANY

*Many companies are using inexpensive immigrant labor to manufacture handbags that bear the coveted “Made in Italy” label.*

By D. T. Max



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The first significant wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in the industrial zone around Prato, a city fifteen miles northwest of Florence, in the nineteen-nineties. Nearly all of them came from Wenzhou, a port city south of Shanghai. For the Chinese, the culture shock was more modest than one might have expected. “The Italians were friendly,” one early arrival remembered. “Like the Chinese, they called one another Uncle. They liked family.” In Tuscany, business life revolved around small, interconnected firms, just as it did in Wenzhou, a city so resolutely entrepreneurial that it had resisted Mao’s collectivization campaign. The Prato area was a hub for mills and workshops, some of which made clothes and leather goods for the great fashion houses. If you were willing to be paid off the books, and by the piece, Prato offered plenty of opportunities. Many Wenzhouans found jobs there. “The Italians, being canny, would subcontract out their work to the Chinese,” Don Giovanni Momigli, a priest whose parish, near Prato, included an early influx of Chinese, told me. “Then they were surprised when the Chinese began to do the work on their own.”

By the mid-nineties, Wenzhouans were setting up textile businesses in small garages, where they often also lived. Soon, they began renting empty workshops, paying with cash. The authorities didn’t ask too many questions. Prato’s business model was falling apart under the pressures of globalization. As it became harder for Italians to make a living in manufacturing, some of them welcomed the money that the Chinese workers

brought into the local economy. If you could no longer be an artisan, you could still be a landlord.

Throughout the aughts, Chinese continued to show up in Tuscany. A non-stop flight was established between Wenzhou and Rome. Some migrants came with tourist visas and stayed on. Others paid smugglers huge fees, which they then had to work off, a form of indentured servitude that was enforced by the threat of violence. The long hours that the Chinese worked astonished many Italians, who were used to several weeks of paid vacation a year and five months of maternity leave. In 1989, the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, using racist language still common among some Italians, published an article about a Chinese worker under the headline “YELLOW STAKHANOVITE ON THE ARNO.”

While Florence was celebrated for its premium leatherwork, Prato was best known for the production of textiles. The Wenzhou workers tacked in a third direction. They imported cheap cloth from China and turned it into what is now called *pronto moda*, or “fast fashion”: polyester shirts, plasticky pants, insignia jackets. These items sold briskly to low-end retailers and in open-air markets throughout the world.

The Chinese firms gradually expanded their niche, making clothes for middle-tier brands, like Guess and American Eagle Outfitters. And in the past decade they have become manufacturers for Gucci, Prada, and other luxury-fashion houses, which use often inexpensive Chinese-immigrant labor to create accessories and expensive handbags that bear the coveted “Made in Italy” label. Many of them are then sold to prosperous consumers in Shanghai and Beijing. It’s not just Italian brands that have profited from this cross-cultural arrangement: a Chinese leather-goods entrepreneur I recently met with just outside Prato was wearing a forty-thousand-dollar Bulgari watch.

**M**ore than ten per cent of Prato’s two hundred thousand legal residents are Chinese. According to Francesco Nannucci, the head of the police’s investigative unit in Prato, the city is also home to some ten thousand Chinese people who are there illegally. Prato is believed to have the second-largest Chinese population of any European city, after Paris, and it has the highest proportion of immigrants in Italy, including a large North African population.

Many locals who worked in the textile and leather industries resented the Chinese immigrants, complaining that they cared only about costs and speed, not about aesthetics, and would have had no idea how to make fine clothes and accessories if not for the local craftsmen who taught them. Simona Innocenti, a leather artisan, told me that her husband was forced out of bag-making by cheaper Chinese competitors. She said of the newcomers, “They copy, they imitate. They don’t do anything original. They’re like monkeys.”

Although it could be argued that the Chinese have revived Prato’s manufacturing industry, there has been a backlash against them. Native residents have accused Chinese immigrants of bringing crime, gang warfare, and garbage to the city. Chinese mill owners, they complain, ignore health laws and evade taxes; they use the schools and the hospitals without contributing money for them. In the early nineties, a group of Italians who worked in areas with a high concentration of immigrants sent an open letter to the Chinese government, sarcastically demanding citizenship: “We are six hundred honest workers who feel as if we were already citizens of your great country.”

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VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

A Hundred Years of Coney Island

The strangest accusation was that the Chinese in Tuscany weren't dying—or, at least, that they weren't leaving any bodies behind. In 1991, the regional government began an investigation into why, during the previous twelve months, not a single Chinese death had been officially recorded in Prato or in two nearby towns. In 2005, the government was still mystified—that year, more than a thousand Chinese arrivals were registered, and only three deaths. Locals suspected that Chinese mobsters were disposing of corpses in exchange for passports, which they then sold to new arrivals, a scheme that took advantage of the native population's apparent inability to tell any one Chinese person from another.

There was a note of jealousy to the Pratans' complaints, as well as a reluctant respect for people who had beaten them at their own game. Elizabeth Krause, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has written about the changes in Prato. She told me, "While I was there, people would say to me, '*Eravamo noi i cinesi*'"—"We were the Chinese."

Even as many Italians maintained a suspicion of Chinese immigrants, they still criticized them for not contributing fully to the wider economy. Innocenti, the leather artisan, claimed that "the Chinese don't even go to the store here. They have a van that goes from factory to factory, selling Band-Aids, tampons, and chicken. And in the back of the van they have a steamer with rice." The under-the-table cash economy of Prato's Chinese factories has facilitated tax evasion. Last year, as the result of an investigation by the Italian finance ministry into five billion dollars' worth of questionable money transfers, the Bank of China, whose Milan branch had reportedly been used for half of them, paid a settlement of more than twenty million dollars. Many of the transfers, the authorities said, represented undeclared income from Chinese-run businesses, or money generated by the counterfeiting of Italian fashion goods.

In Italy, these sorts of investigations are often more show than substance, and many Chinese residents see themselves as convenient targets. "We didn't invent this way of doing business," one mill owner pointed out to me. "If you go south from Rome, you'll find people who are a *lot* worse than the Chinese." He speculated that some Italians disliked the Chinese for working harder than they did, and for succeeding. In the Prato area, some six thousand businesses are registered to Chinese citizens. Francesco Xia, a real-estate agent who heads a social organization for young Chinese-Italians, said, "The

Chinese feel like the Jews of the thirties. Prato is a city that had a big economic crisis, and now there's a nouveau-riche class of Chinese driving fancy cars, spending money in restaurants, and dressing in the latest fashions. It's a very dangerous situation."

At a time when Europe is filled with anti-immigrant rhetoric, political extremists have pointed to the demographic shifts in Prato as proof that Italy is under siege. In February, Patrizio La Pietra, a right-wing senator, told a Prato newspaper that the city needed to confront "Chinese economic illegality," and that the underground economy had "brought the district to its knees, eliminated thousands of jobs, and exposed countless families to hunger." Such assertions have been effective: in Italy's recent national elections, Tuscany, which since the end of the Second World War had consistently supported leftist parties, gave twice as many votes to right-wing and populist parties as it did to those on the left. Giovanni Donzelli, a member of the quasi-Fascist Fratelli d'Italia party, who last month was elected a national representative, told me, "The Chinese have their own restaurants and their own banks—even their own police force. You damage the economy twice. Once, because you compete unfairly with the other businesses in the area, and the second time because the money doesn't go back into the Tuscan economic fabric." He added that he had once tried to talk with some Chinese parents at his children's school. "They had been here six or seven years, and they still didn't speak Italian," he scoffed. "Because they didn't need to!"

Prato's *centro storico* is a picturesque maze of streets paved with flagstones and bordered by walls that date to the early Renaissance. One Sunday in February, when I visited, many locals were doing what Italians call *le vasche* ("laps"), walking from one end of the district to the other, occasionally pausing to look in shopwindows. Some were on their way to family lunches, carrying plates of biscotti wrapped in shiny paper stamped with the names of the city's best bakeries. The Duomo has superb frescoes by Fra Filippo Lippi—"The most excellent of all his works," according to Vasari—and a gold-and-glass reliquary that holds what is claimed to be the sacred girdle of Mary. In a sense, it is Prato's original textile.

Just outside the city walls, in Prato's Chinatown, well-to-do Chinese families were carrying their own wrapped parcels of sweets: mashed-taro buns, red-bean cakes. Suburbanites, coming into town to see relatives, drove BMWs, Audis, and Mercedeses.

(In a telling remark, more than one Italian insisted to me that no Chinese person would be caught in a Fiat Panda, one of the Italian company's most modest cars.) According to a 2015 study by a regional economic agency, Chinese residents contribute more than seven hundred million euros to Prato's provincial economy, about eleven per cent of its total.

Chinatown, though, looked dishevelled. In the alleyways, I saw that many of the windows were covered with blankets. A few days later, I accompanied authorities on several raids and learned that there were sweatshops behind some of those windows. In rooms without heat, the newest and poorest arrivals, many of them undocumented, sat bent over sewing machines, tacking collars onto shirts or affixing brightly colored stripes to jogging pants. Such pants might sell to retailers for about eight euros—a fifth of what they would cost if they were made legally by Italians.

The clothing-manufacturing operations in Chinatown tend to be small scale. After visiting the *centro storico*, I drove through the areas around Prato. I passed block after block of businesses with Chinese characters next to English phrases: Normcore, Feel Good, Miss & Yes. Giant, low-slung buildings combined manufacturing areas with showrooms where buyers could examine samples and place orders. Jessica Moloney, a London-born brand consultant and agent for importers, explained to me, “If you've got three to six months to wait and you need five hundred to a thousand pieces, you go to China. But if you have only two weeks and need a hundred pieces, you come to Prato.” She noted, “TJ Maxx is everywhere here. I don't know anyone who isn't working with them.”

The word *prato* means “meadow,” and even here, amid structures that evoked the sprawl outside an airport, there were green spaces. In June of 2016, in one of the grassy squares bordered by cluster pines, Chinese locals held a violent protest, after two and a half years of mounting tensions. In 2013, an electrical short had caused a fire that destroyed a workshop called Teresa Moda, killing seven Chinese workers. The victims had both worked and slept in the buildings. One had died while trying to squeeze through a barred window. “I could hear the cries of the Chinese inside,” an off-duty carabinieri who battled the fire told *Corriere della Sera*.

After the fire, the Prato authorities, with no small amount of condescension, said they'd made up their minds that they could no longer neglect the strangers living among them. They would offer Chinese immigrants the blessings of workplace protections, legal wages, and sanitary standards. Italian officials did a sweep of the Prato area, and discovered a great many unregistered mills. Between 2014 and 2017, they conducted inspections of more than eight thousand Chinese-run businesses. They knocked on the doors of mills at night and without warning, before owners could clean up, or close, or reopen down the street under a new name. Officially, the raids, part of a program called *Lavoro Sicuro* ("Safe Workplace"), were not focussed on any ethnicity. But everyone called them "the Chinese raids," including one of the architects of the plan, Renzo Berti, the director of the disease-prevention unit at the central-Tuscany department of health. Berti told me that the effort had improved the working conditions in the Chinese-owned mills. When the raids started, he said, ninety-three per cent of the inspected businesses were committing violations, from illegal dormitories to exposed wiring. Now the rate was thirty-five per cent. "This has been like a steamroller," he said. "We are having our effect."

The Italians have also cracked down on crime in the Chinese community. In January, the police arrested Zhang Naizhong, the alleged kingpin of the Chinese-Italian mafia, which, they said, had a large presence in Prato. Francesco Nannucci, of the Prato investigative unit, told me that Zhang was the *padrino*—the godfather. He added, with a laugh, "They learned their structure from the Italians." (The Italian Mob is also active in Prato, but Nannucci said that the two groups don't interact.) Nannucci estimates that eighty per cent of the city's Chinese mills paid protection money to Zhang's organization, which was also involved in drugs, prostitution, and gambling. (A recent pretrial tribunal cast doubt on the evidence, though Zhang remains under house arrest.) Before arresting Zhang, Nannucci said, police had followed him from Rome to Prato. He changed cars eight times along the way, to thwart efforts to track him; visited a restaurant, where local Chinese businessmen lined up at his table and bowed; and was eventually arrested at a hotel in Prato. Nannucci was pleased with the operation, but disappointed that he'd received little help from the Chinese Pratans. "There's a lot of *omertà*," he said.

The Chinese see the raids and Zhang's arrest primarily as harassment. One Chinese mill owner even pulled out a gun when police officers came to inspect his building.

(The gun turned out to be fake.) Armando Chang, who owns a travel agency in the Prato area, told me, “When the Italians do an investigation, the ugly thing, in my opinion, is that they first develop a theory, then try to find the facts that go with it.” He claimed that he’d never even heard of a local Chinese mafia. “I learned about them from Bruce Lee movies,” he said. “But I’ve never seen them here.” A group of Chinese professionals told me it wasn’t a coincidence that the number of raids had increased during the run-up to the national elections.

During a raid in June of 2016, an elderly Chinese man got into an altercation with a carabinieri while trying to leave the mill where he worked. The man, who was carrying an infant, was reportedly jostled, and the baby fell and was injured. Word spread on social media, and several hundred Chinese soon gathered in the square, shouting and throwing rocks and bottles. Police put down the protest, and the regional government promised more raids. At that point, the Chinese foreign ministry stepped in and gently warned the Italians not to pick on its citizens. (Nearly all Chinese-born Pratans remain citizens of China.) The two sides promised to work together, but tensions remain high. Luca Zhou, the head of the Italian branch of Ramunion, a Chinese charity, said, “They rent us the factories, but they don’t want to communicate with us. We need more friendship. We should be like brothers.”

On the same Sunday, I walked across the square where the protest had taken place, and arrived at a huge industrial building whose façade still bore the words “BP Studio,” the name of the well-known Florentine fashion house that had once occupied the space. Laundry was drying on a line. The employees standing at the entrance looked less than thrilled to see me, but they allowed me to go inside. The building, whose interior was almost the size of a soccer field, had an open floor plan; rows of Chinese women, and a few men, sewed and worked leather under fluorescent lights, even though it was Sunday. The work did not seem hard so much as unending: some people were napping, their heads resting on the sewing tables. Children played in corners or watched TV. Blouses, bright-red fake-leather bags, and key chains were stacked in neat piles, ready to be shipped. This was a quintessential *pronto moda* factory, able to produce clothes and accessories quickly in an era in which the fashion seasons have given way to a series of frantic commissions prompted by viral Instagram posts. A large window in the workshop looked out onto hilly pastures. Along a ridge, a shepherd was guiding a flock of sheep.



While I was in Tuscany, a Chinese mill owner I'll call Enrico—most Chinese immigrants adopt Italian first names—permitted me to visit his operation. He had requested anonymity because the fashion companies require vendors to sign confidentiality agreements. In 1988, when Enrico was thirteen, he emigrated from Wenzhou with his mother. The locals were friendly at first, he said, but then, as more Wenzhouans came, the warm feelings faded. But he never seriously considered leaving. “We Chinese have a culture of adapting to the moment,” he said. He told me that, as an entrepreneur, he did everything by the book—he even had a pension program for employees. But he acknowledged that not all Chinese factory owners worked this way. “If you play too closely by the rules, you'll never get started,” he said. He clarified: “A Chinese person who uses a shortcut always does the hard work, too. Using the same shortcut, an Italian will work seven to eight hours. A Chinese person, if there's a goal, will work twelve.”

Enrico's operation, which focussed on leather goods, had a much more refined atmosphere than factories that I had visited while accompanying police on raids. It was not unusual for a mill manager to claim that he lived alone in the adjacent bedrooms; in response, the Italian officials would point to long rows of slippers. Then the police would search the premises for undocumented workers, and a finance inspector would look for evidence of cash payments. (During one raid, I saw a health inspector peer into a rice cooker in a hallway and ask a colleague, “What the fuck are they eating here?” “Some sort of soup,” the colleague answered, with a shrug.) In the end, the authorities would tabulate a fine, which usually came to several hundred euros. (“They treat us like an A.T.M.,” Francesco Xia complained to me.) Undocumented immigrants were taken to police stations, where they had little to fear. Extended detention was rare, and Italy couldn't expel them to China without proof of their Chinese citizenship.

In contrast to those more humble workshops, Enrico's factory reminded me of a well-run electronics factory. The workers ate in a proper lunchroom and wore crisp uniforms. The ductwork was professional, and the wiring was encased in a dropped ceiling. The labor was divided up into stations: bending the leather into a bag shape, sewing it, installing an inner lining, and attaching buckles and straps. Leather sections waiting to be stitched into bags were neatly laid out on rolling carts, like slabs of tuna at a sushi counter. “I run a sort of special operation,” Enrico said with pride. “Famous brands send us the material, and we make the finished product.”

Italy's luxury-fashion industry has long struggled to lower costs without compromising on quality. In the seventies and eighties, the Pratan system of interconnected workshops ran smoothly, but in the nineties, as trade barriers fell around the world, fashion houses saw an opportunity too good to resist. Why not manufacture "Made in Italy" products in Eastern Europe and in China? They would still be designed in Milan or Florence, so the label wouldn't be a complete lie. Reports of the practice leaked out, and the brands found themselves under pressure to market their products more honestly. In 2010, Santo Versace—a politician who is also the chairman of the Versace fashion house—championed a law that contained a very Italian compromise: if two of the steps in the manufacturing process took place in Italy, the item could bear the valuable label. But the famous fashion companies continued to look for ways to make the "Made in Italy" tag mean what it was supposed to mean without forgoing profits.

As I was walking around Enrico's shop, I turned a corner and discovered dozens of nylon Prada briefcases hanging on hooks. I'd just seen the same bags for sale in Florence, for about two thousand dollars each. Around another corner were leather Dolce & Gabbana shoulder bags, with the brand's distinctive "DG" rhinestone buckles. There was an area dedicated to an élite French company's bags, which also retailed at around two thousand dollars each. On one table was a cardboard prototype. Enrico showed me the storeroom where these riches were locked up at night.

I thought of a recent visit that I had made to Scandicci, the iconic Italian leatherwork village, just outside Florence. I'd met an artisan named Andrea Calistri, whose workshop was filled with mementos from three generations of leatherworkers. He told me that he had done jobs for Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, and Prada, but that he objected to their use of mills that violated labor laws. He had helped found an association, called "100% Made in Italy," that focussed on insuring proper labor practices, but his rhetoric was unmistakably nativist. " 'Made in Italy' means made by *Italians!* " he told me. He was surrounded by shelves filled with maroon leather handbags. They were supple and gorgeous. Then again, so were the bags that Enrico's employees were making.

Another Chinese entrepreneur in Prato, whom I'll call Arturo, met me in his office; two elegant Gucci bags sat on a table in front of him. The big fashion brands, he said, all have some factories of their own. (In Scandicci, I saw a new factory emblazoned with a giant "PRADA" on the façade.) But, Arturo went on, "think about it—they sell ten

thousand bags a *month*. How are they going to produce that many? They cut the leather and make the prototypes, but that's it." He added that he had turned down work from Prada because the company didn't pay enough. (In a statement, Prada said that it "stands out for its strong ties with the artisanal craft experience typical of the Italian tradition.")

A third Chinese proprietor, whom I'll call Luigi, estimated that more than a hundred Chinese-owned workshops in Tuscany were assembling bags for the famous fashion houses. Each of these workshops, in turn, used five to ten subcontractors for tasks like stitching straps and finishing hardware. All the proprietors I met with spoke adequate Italian, but Luigi's was truly fluent. He said that his operation had filled orders from Chloé, Burberry, Fendi, Balenciaga, Saint Laurent, and Chanel. "On the level of craftsmanship, Chanel is the *top*," he said, using the English word. "They're the fussiest about the quality." Working for a company like Fendi wasn't easy for a Chinese person, he went on. You had to "acquire an Italian mentality" and "conceive of the bag as an Italian would." He explained, "A Chinese person thinks only that he has to get so many bags done, but behind every bag there's a precise study of what it's about. I think the Italians are the greatest artisans in the world."

Arturo's factory was clean and organized. When the workers used sprays to dye leather, they put on masks. Representatives from the fashion brands, I was told, came to inspect the first round of bags; the rest of the order was then made to their specifications. Gucci is known for giving extensive instructions, with precise demands about the number and the length of stitches. Hiring highly skilled workers was therefore essential.

Arturo took me through the economics of doing work for luxury-fashion brands. He was paid a set fee for an order, no matter how long it took to complete. He generally lost money on the first bags he finished, but his workers got much faster with repetition, and the later iterations were profitable. When he was fulfilling Gucci contracts, he said, the company paid him an average of nineteen euros an hour. He showed me a bag that featured the company's insignia fabric, with its interlocking "G"s, and said, "This fabric would cost fifteen euros a metre. But they make millions and millions of metres, so they don't pay fifteen. Maybe ten. The leather here costs maybe fifteen to twenty euros. It's two euros for the zipper, plus the money they pay us—that's

the cost. And they put it on the market at between ten and fifteen times that cost.” The most skilled workers at higher-end Chinese factories make as much as two thousand euros a month—a middle-class living in Italy.

Luigi told me that, in recent years, the big fashion houses had grown more careful about their outsourcing, and had begun conducting their own private inspections of contractors’ facilities. “I undergo seven audits a year for seven brands!” he said. “Conditions of work, contract terms, safety—they put your company under a microscope.” The Chinese proprietors I spoke with all said that it was useful to have an Italian business partner. Luigi had one, and also several Italians working on the factory floor. He explained that having Italian employees made it “easier to get work, because the big houses feel more trusting.” He said that it also meant no fashion house would dare ask him to accept less money than what it would pay an Italian.

In 2014, an Italian artisan spoke to the investigative television journalist Sabrina Giannini. Gucci had given him a big contract, he said, but the pay was so low—twenty-four euros a bag—that he had subcontracted the work to a Chinese mill, where employees worked fourteen-hour days and were paid half what he made. When the bags made it to stores, they were priced at between eight hundred and two thousand dollars. An inspector for Gucci told Giannini that he saw no reason to ask employees about their working conditions. (Gucci denounced the television report as “false” and “not evidence of our reality.” The company says that, in the past few years, it has increased scrutiny of its supply chain, including subcontractors, and has “blacklisted” around seventy manufacturers.)

Recently, many Chinese mill owners have started hiring workers from countries including Syria, Pakistan, and Senegal. Several weeks before I arrived in the Prato area, a small protest was held outside a local workshop that regularly received subcontracts from a nearby firm that produces metalwork for well-known fashion brands. The workshop’s Chinese proprietor had abruptly closed the operation, locking out his employees, who were mostly Senegalese, and stiffing them of their wages. They found him around the corner, in another mill that he owned, and he agreed to pay them if they met him back at the workshop. When they returned to the factory, he greeted them at the front door, and asked them to wait a minute for their money. He then walked out the back door and got into a waiting car.

Following this Keystone Cops farce, a national labor union encouraged the employees to stage several public protests. One of the employees who protested later told me that he had been paid only twelve hundred euros a month, with no benefits, to work in a freezing-cold room. He remembered working on products for companies including Ferragamo, Prada, and Dior. The crew chief, he said, “would scream at us to work faster, to get more pieces done.” (The employees were officially paid a higher salary, to comply with the law, but, according to a union representative, managers required them to withdraw their “extra” wages and give that money to the owner.)

The workshop has now gone out of business—the employees were never paid what they were owed. But an enterprise run by the same owners, in the same location, continues to operate. In February, it received an order, from the same subcontracting firm, to finish seven hundred and eighty-five Chanel buckles.

**A**fter Italy became a unified nation, in 1861, Massimo d’Azeglio, a Piedmontese statesman and novelist, is said to have commented, “Now that there is an Italy, it will be necessary to make the Italians.” But, until recently, few people had thought about how to make a hyphenated Italian. During one of the raids, I asked an Italian official who was there to translate Mandarin why there weren’t more Chinese Pratan translators. If there were, I suggested, the mill workers might be more responsive to questions, and would not be able to talk to one another privately by switching to the Wenzhou dialect, which not even Mandarin speakers understand. She answered, brightly, “Because we’re *Italians!*”

Tuscans may fantasize about walling themselves off from the forces of globalism, but, as the Chinese-Italian economic relationship grows ever more complex, the illusion is getting harder to maintain. The per-capita income in Wenzhou is now more than a hundred times what it was when the migration to Prato began. As a result, wage expectations in the Chinese factories in Prato are increasing. Meanwhile, the travel agent Armando Chang told me, the Chinese “are no longer coming in the same numbers.” Some are even returning to Wenzhou from Prato. “You can make more money back home,” Enrico said. He told me that, partly because of rising salaries in Wenzhou, he paid his Chinese manager more than he would pay an Italian.

The Chinese community in Prato is evolving rapidly. Many of the immigrants’ children, having lived in Italy since birth, are looking beyond the garment and leather-

goods industries. “Our kids don’t want to make bags,” Arturo complained. A friend of his agreed, telling me, “They all want to go to the Bocconi now!” (The Bocconi is an elite private university in Milan.) I met one such girl, an eighteen-year-old named Luisa, at a pleasant Chinese bistro called Ravioli di Cristina. (The Italians call dumplings “Chinese ravioli.”) Her father sold coffee-vending machines to the Chinese mills. Chinese Pratans, she complained, thought only about money, so she had mostly Italian friends. When the young Chinese Pratan waiter, who was flirting with her, urged her to listen to a Korean pop song, she countered by recommending a song by the American d.j. duo the Chainsmokers. Her public school, Buzzi, on the eastern edge of Prato, has few Chinese students, and that—along with its specialization in engineering—was why she’d chosen it. “In the beginning, the other students ignore you,” she said. But she had gradually formed friendships. “They still sometimes say racist things—they call me Yellow Face—but I joke back at them,” she said.

Deborah Sarmiento, a Pratan who started a tutoring organization for Chinese children whose parents work long hours, views Chinese immigration more philosophically than many of her neighbors: what the Pratans had to do, she said, was embrace what was special in their tradition while also learning from the Chinese. “We’ve been occupied over and over since we were Borgo al Cornio,” she said. “First the Etruscans, then the Longobards, then the Florentines and the Spanish. And we were always able to overcome by looking at our roots. It gives you a chance to really understand what it means to be from Prato.”

Sara Lin, a thirty-eight-year-old fashion designer with a blond streak in her short black hair, is another sign of change. Her parents had brought her with them to Italy when she was seven; her father worked in textiles near Milan, and her mother had a dressmaking company in Tuscany. At first, Lin felt disoriented. “All the Italians looked the same,” she recalled. “It was hard to tell one face from another.” But she soon settled in and began to excel at school, in part because she was good at math. In her early teens, she returned to China for two years to improve her Chinese and learn about the culture. She didn’t fit in. “That was a more racist society than the one here!” she said.

After finishing high school, she entered the fashion industry. Later, she and her husband worked on bags for Valentino and Gucci. Eventually, she realized that she wanted more—she wanted to design. In 2008, she acquired the rights to a once famous

Florentine handbag brand, Desmo. “At first, I encountered a lot of resistance and defiance from the Florentine inner crowd,” she recalled. But Lin, along with an Italian business partner, successfully revived Desmo, creating a line of leather bags that sell for a few hundred dollars each. (The company’s Web site notes that all Desmo bags are “Made in Tuscany” and “crafted by the skillful hands of experts.”) Lin then had a more ambitious idea: to make a “deconstructable” purse. She showed me what she called a Pop Bag. You took bright, playful component pieces—a back, a front, adjustable straps, and so on—and clipped them together to build your own bag. You could slot in different colored panels, depending on your preferences. Yes, it was silly, but it was also a modern and witty gloss on what many other Chinese were doing around Prato: assembling bags.

Lin felt that she had both the grit of the Chinese—“When I was pregnant, nineteen years ago, I was in the workshop at noon and giving birth at three”—and the flexibility of the Italians. China gave her discipline; Italy gave her possibilities. She argued that, “in China, what a man can do with one word takes a woman five. A woman in China needs grinding determination and force. But here in Italy it’s the reverse. A woman, one word. A man, five.” In 2016, Lin opened her first Pop Bag store, full of glistening fixtures and backlit shelving, on Via Calimala, in Florence. And, a few weeks ago, she opened a kiosk at the Time Warner Center, in New York City. She had initially imagined something as splashy as her Florentine boutique, but Manhattan is a long way from Prato, and she is a careful entrepreneur. Her Pop Bags are also sold in China. When I asked her if Chinese sales were helped by the fact that she was born there, she was unsure how to respond. “I don’t know,” she said. “We haven’t done a study on it.” ♦

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*D. T. Max is a staff writer and the author of “Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace.” [Read more »](#)*

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## Video

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*Malcolm Gladwell on School Shooters and Police Bias*

*David Remnick speaks with Gladwell about using theory to understand complex phenomena, and how that understanding can change.*

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