

1.1 Gathering around punk: Interethnic relations in Prato's Chinatown

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A b s t r a c t

On 12 April 2016, a small historic event happened in Prato, home to Italy's second largest Chinese community: thanks to local DIY collective/record label Santa Valvola, punk band Demerit was the first Chinese group to ever play Prato. The designated venue was in the Macrolotto Zero urban area, former industrial heart of the city, where the Chinese migrant community has settled in the 1990s, transforming the social structure of the neighbourhood. On that night, a punk concert was the occasion for putting together Prato's alternative local scene and the Chinese audience, which rarely takes part in the city's underground movements. It was a huge, unexpected success. This research aims to analyze the event against its social implications. The work is based upon my own observation of the concert, several interviews I carried with the concert's promoters and socio-historical literature.

Keywords: *Prato, Chinatown, transculturality, Chinese punk.*



1. Introduction

A little more than two years ago, I had the chance to witness a sort of historic event for the city of Prato, Tuscany. This small town of less than 200.000 soul hosts Italy's second largest Chinese community, accounting for more than 10% of the total residents.⁶ On Tuesday, 12 April 2016, for the first time ever a Chinese rock band performed in town, and precisely in the Macrolotto Zero area, where that community mostly resides and works. The peculiarity of the event struck me at once when I entered Circolo Curiel: as almost a regular of the local underground scene, I had never seen that kind of crowd. Several reports of the concerts with photos can be found on the web. A clear vision of the audience composition can be found in David Marsili's photos for *hobothemag* (Fedi & Nincheri, 2016), and in Mirko Lisella's and Filippo Gualandi's for *Pratosfera* (Banci, 2016; Lisella, 2016). It wasn't just a question of numbers, although the exceptional attendance at the event even earned it a satirical piece on the web.⁷ It was the first time I saw such a mixed audience at a concert in Prato: the presence of Chinese participants was striking, both in terms of numbers and composition – citizens of all ages were there, from old ladies to little children in their parents' arms. Also, proxemics relations in the audience were quite peculiar: especially at the beginning, Chinese participants were mostly still, some observing along the walls of the room, some standing close to the stage, while the pogo exploded in the middle: it was clear that most of them were not familiar with experiencing a punk rock live act and weren't there because they were Demerit's fans. The exceptionality of the event pushed me to investigate its implications with regards to the life of the two communities coexisting in Prato.

2. Prato's Chinatown: a socio-historical background⁸

Chinese immigration in Tuscany started in the 1950s, but it wasn't until the 1980s that their presence on the territory became significant. Immigrants mainly came from the Zhejiang region, especially from the prefecture-level city of Wenzhou, which after Deng Xiaoping's reforms had undergone a major economic development that, however, didn't touch peri-urban and rural areas: as a consequence, a widespread sense of relative deprivation induced a mass migration from the region. In Tuscany, Chinese immigrants found employment in the local garment industry, settling in the areas around Campi Bisenzio and San Donnino (Florence). They were soon able to start family businesses that would function as subcontractors for Italian firms.

Fluxes got so intense so quickly that San Donnino was nicknamed "San Pechino" (Saint Beijing). Soon warehouses and housing facilities were running short, so Chinese workers and entrepreneurs in the early 1990s partly moved to the urban territory of Prato, where they were joined by new immigrants. Italian garment companies would resort to Chinese subcontractors in Prato for the low-priced and fast production they ensured. But since the beginning of the twenty-first century Chinese businesses have started expanding to take control over the entire cycle of the ready-to-wear garment industry, which has developed enormously: this process has marked Prato's experience as unique in Italy.⁹

Still today, the vast majority of the Chinese population is employed in that sector. Chinese immigrants mostly settled in the former home of city's textile district, which had moved its facilities to more peripheral areas. When the area now known as Macrolotto Zero hosted the expansion of the Chinese garment

⁶ The Chinese community in Milan, bigger in numbers, only accounts for 2% of the total residents. As a matter of fact, proportionally to population size, Prato is home to one of the largest communities of Chinese residents in the whole of Europe. Official data can be retrieved on <http://statistica.comune.prato.it/?act=f&fid=6370>.

⁷ The article's title was: Prato, solo 6000 paganti allo show dei Demerit, delusi gli organizzatori ("Prato, only 6000 paying attendees at Demerit's show, to the promoters' disappointment") (hardcorelladuemila, 2016).

⁸ In addition to edited works (Francovich, 1999; Ceccagno, 2003; Marsden, 2014; Krause & Bressan, 2017), this account draws information from personal communication with local researchers Sara Iacopini and Roberto Pecorale.

⁹ The local Chinese community shows features that are quite distinct to those of the other communities in Italy, where the tertiary sector (restaurants, shops, import-export businesses) normally prevails.

industry, it gradually morphed into a very peculiar Chinatown, with restaurants and shops opening every day alongside the warehouses and workshops of the ready-to-wear industry. Long before the Chinese immigration took place, Macrolotto Zero was already characterized by a blend of workshops and housing facilities, which resulted from “the postwar phase of development that launched the Italian industrial districts” (Krause & Bressan, 2017, p. 39-42). Upon this, in the 1990s architect Bernardo Secchi developed an urban plan (known as the Secchi Plan) that was meant “to carve out an exemplary physical space of urban development that revalued the factory city in all its diversity” (Krause & Bressan, 2017, p. 42). The idea of the *città fabbrica* was based on a strong vision of *mixité*, a concept that Secchi himself had coined (Secchi, 1996a, 1996b).¹⁰ However, as Krause and Bressan stress,

For some local residents, Secchi’s vision of mixité was difficult to embrace. [...] Older residents associated the area with Chinese newcomers, economic activities that push the limits of legality, militarized security blitzes that intensified under Cenni’s mayorship, compromised hygienic conditions of roads and trash receptacles, and overcrowding of private homes (Krause and Bressan, 2017, p. 33).

The economic and urban expansion of the Chinese community in the Macrolotto Zero has been mostly received with hostility, as an “invasion” that has caused the crisis of local pre-existent economies. A well spread conception is that of a “parallel district”, where illegality and slave-like working conditions are endemic and addressed as a “Chinese feature”. Descriptions of a “hell-like” situation abound in media coverage. Although finer analysts struggle to project a more complex and realistic interpretation of these processes, calling into cause broader transformations in the global work market, stereotypical descriptions still prevail and foster a sense of separateness and opposition between the Chinese community and the citizens of Italian origin: the signs of an “us VS them” dynamics are tangible in common discourse. Although the high concentration of Chinese residents makes Prato an extreme case, this also applies to other communities in the country: as Marsden (2014, p. 1242) puts it, “despite the high level of economic integration of Chinese in Italy, leading to the emergence of Chinese entrepreneurship in the national economy, the social inclusion of new citizens remains limited and Italians have always looked on Chinese with suspicion”.

Against the idea of a monolithic, work-obsessed community, still well spread among citizens of Italian origin and connected with deep racism issues, recent investigations in Prato stress its “increasing heterogeneity and social stratification” (Marsden, 2014, p. 1243). The growth of the tertiary sector and the emergence of a “middle class” between the two largest groups active in the garment industry (that of *zagong*, unskilled workers, e *laoban*, entrepreneurs) is probably the most significant factor of change that is shaping the profile of Prato’s Chinatown today. The expansion of a social group having free time from work has a crucial impact on the development of sociability models and cultural consumption occasions. Nevertheless, as new places of sociability managed by Chinese and Italian youth are starting to pop up in the area,¹¹ Chinese citizens’ social life is still limited by a widely shared feeling of personal vulnerability:¹²

11 Examples include *Taro Garden*, a bubble tea bar, and *Utopia Cafè*, both recently opened and run by young Pratesi with Chinese origin. *Lottozero*, instead, is a textile laboratory created in 2016 by two sisters, Tessa, an economist, and Arianna Moroder, a textile designer and artist, whose goals are “to encourage the development of emerging talent through creative residencies and collaborations with established realities, and to revitalize one of the leading textile districts in Europe, Prato” (Retrieved from: <http://www.lottozero.org/our-story/>).

12 Krause and Bressan’s ethnographic research, conducted between 2012 and 2015 with more than 41 immigrant parents, showed that “a recurring refrain among Chinese residents in audio-recorded interviews [...] was the expression of alienation not only from the tempos of work but specifically from living in Prato. Although participants said they felt comfort in having many other Chinese people around them, living in neighborhoods such as Macrolotto Zero, they also deeply felt the anger and racism directed at them. Many recounted experiences of being burglarized and mugged. They expressed fear and vulnerability” (Krause & Bressan, 2017, p. 45-46).

10 Yet, as Secchi stated in a 2014 interview to local news blog Pratosfera, when the plan was implemented it was changed so much that he wouldn’t define it as his (Pattume, 2014).

Prato is perceived as a very dangerous place for Chinese residents as they are often victims of mugging due to their stereotypical image of “walking ATMs”, carrying large amounts of cash around. As a consequence, parents give kids very strict rules and curfews, and most teenagers' social life is confined in safe spaces like malls or private karaoke rooms. This can be addressed as one of the factors, both practical and psychological, limiting the involvement of Chinese residents in the city's mainstream or underground cultural life, proving the reductivity of a reading that only refers to an alleged cultural separateness.

This detachment has been addressed as a problem from different perspectives: “integration”, or its more recent, softer counterpart “inclusion”, have been the administration's watchwords in the past thirty years. If during the time of anti-Chinese mayor Roberto Cenni (2009-2014) the idea of a closed community permeated with illegality was exploited in a belligerent political agenda addressing immigration as the cause of all problems, new policies of dialogue seem to be spreading recently: several associations¹³ and individuals work on the territory to explore original forms of contact stemming from a deeper involvement in and understanding of the Chinese community. Demerit's concert falls within this perspective.

3. Demerit's concert: a kind of magic

That event was not the product of a coldly pondered strategy, though: it was an experiment, whose results went far beyond any expectations. When the organizers talk about it, they always stress it was “a kind of magic”, and an unrepeatably one. But choices were of course made, and they proved extremely successful. The presence of that large crowd of Chinese residents was indeed striking: what caused this anomaly that night? Is there, at the core of that event, a path to be walked for the development of shared spaces and experiences between the different communities shaping Prato's peculiar identity today? Is it there maybe that one can find a way to go beyond top-down models of “integration” and “inclusion”? It might be worth trying to deconstruct that ‘kind of magic’ to its basic elements and extract the recipe of its success.

3.1. The people

The driving force for the concert's organization was Santa Valvola (“Saint Valve”), a loose collective of music promoters / record label, at whose core are three musicians of the city's hard-core scene: Robert Bardi, Daniele D'Andrea, and Emanuele Ravalli. They have been struggling since 2010 to keep the city's music scene alive supporting local bands, releasing albums and organizing concert series, festivals, parties. In a perfect DIY style, the motto on their Facebook page is: *FACCIAMO MUSICA PERCHÉ CI PIACE, ECCIAO!* (We make music because we like it, that's it!).

In a personal communication, they told me they had been thinking about booking a Chinese band for a while, especially as some people started gravitating around Santa Valvola who shared a special interest in Chinese culture and independent music and worked in close contact with the Chinese community in Prato. Among them is Elisa Melani, an employee of the Italian branch of a Chinese garment company: having contacts in the punk international information net, one day she heard that Demerit had a show

13 For example, cultural association [chi-na] was founded in the Macrolotto Zero by a group of architects and designers. They promote events such as *Grande cinema Chinatown*, a series of free screenings in Chinese and Italian in a public square of the neighborhood, with movies aiming to represent an encounter between the two cultures.

coming in Tuscany, so they contacted the band's European management (Julia Perraca of Fortuny Music / Maybe Mars record label) to see whether the band had a day off: as a matter of fact, they did. The organizing group also included Roberto Pecorale, a Chinese language teacher at Cicognini high school in Prato and a collaborator of Confucius Institute Florence, Chinese underground music connoisseur and keyboardist of "post-blues 'n' noise psycho stone-gaze" band Neko At Stella; Sara Iacopini, former musician and currently a PhD candidate in Migration Studies at Middlesex University London researching issues regarding Chinese immigration in Prato (moreover, in 2016 Iacopini was working on a research-action project on diversity management in the area of Macrolotto Zero¹⁴); and Jacopo Rossi, a researcher in Chinese literature who got his bachelor degree at University of Florence, where his language teacher happened to be Valentina Pedone, current director of Confucius Institute Florence: in the late 1990s Pedone was active as a singer in the Beijing punk scene, where she was known as Tina Rockstar (O'Dell, 2014). This group of people have a special characteristic: they are familiar with both the underground music scene and the Chinese community. It is not just a matter of practical contacts: they manage a double cultural code.

3.2. Communication

This was crucial in promoting the concert. Communication of the event was thorough (social networks, newspapers, blogs, radios, flyers). But more importantly, it was conducted on different registers: some were to attract the crowd of independent music concerts, others were directed to the Chinese community. Just two examples:

- Radio Italia Cina, a Prato-based radio devoted to creating a bridge between Italian and Chinese culture and economy, was involved in spreading the news. If we look at the article that was published on their website (Marshall, 2016), we notice that the Italian part focuses on the uniqueness of the event in social terms, addressing the transculturality of punk as a music genre with no borders, its rebellious character and the specificity of Chinese punk as an anti-govern force, mentioning Demerit's problems with censorship and so on; the Chinese part only says that a punk band from Beijing will perform at Circolo Curiel.
- Lorenzo Coppini / Odio Design, an independent graphic designer and screenprinter from Prato, and a friend of Santa Valvola's, provided a special design for the event (Figure 1.1.1). Iacopini and Pecorale realized that this could work very well to attract young Italian audience but would prove less effective for the Chinese community. They insisted on producing a different, less "avantgarde" and more straightforward informative flyer (Figure 1.1.2) to be distributed in every local shop in Chinatown. In fact, on the day of the concert, even the band's photographer helped with this, explaining locals what was going to happen that night. This direct, face-to-face strategy felt more appropriate for attracting a community which was not at all familiar with the aesthetic codes the original design used.

¹⁴ "Trame di quartiere", a project by IRIS Research Institute for territorial and social development, was part of "Progetto Prato", a development project enhanced by Regione Toscana.



Figure 1.1.1 – The flyer designed by Lorenzo Coppini / Odio Design
Source: courtesy of Lorenzo Coppini / Odio Design.

3.3. DIY approach

The whole production of the event was handled with a DIY, bottom-up approach, and not as an institutional “inclusion” initiative. This meant there were no public funds to be used, but also that it was free from the distancing rhetoric and constraints that often come with institutional affiliation. Pecorale organized a crowdfunding event, giving a special lecture about Chinese independent music at Spazio AUT, the coworking space/bar of a local leftwing political and cultural association: the money gathered was used to cover expenses, like accommodation, food and a small fee for the band (their request was very reasonable, being a day off). All tech gear and backline were either provided by Santa Valvola members or borrowed from friends, including the stage.

3.4. The location

This was necessary as Circolo Curiel is not a music venue: it is a plain room with a bar usually hosting after-school activities held by cooperatives for Chinese kids in the afternoon, and *tombola* (bingo) games for citizens of Italian origin at night. Although setting it up for the concert was extremely hard, its location right in the middle of Chinatown and its multiple cultural profile made for an ideal space for this experiment. It is no coincidence that Bernardo Secchi’s last debate about the Macrolotto Zero was held there in 2014. Indeed, the audience success of the concert seems tightly linked to this choice.

3.5. The music

Although stylistically quite foreign for part of the audience, picking a punk rock band for this event was probably the fifth essential ingredient to make the recipe perfect. Demerit’s music, with its energy and immediacy, provided a basis for “social intimacy”, which Thomas Turino (2008, p. 2-3) identifies as the key feature for music as a social practice: “Through moving and sounding together in synchrony, people can experience a feeling of oneness with others”. Punk rock places itself at the crossroads of what Turino calls “presentational performance”



Figure 1.1.2 – The flyer designed by Sara Iacopini and Roberto Pecorale
Source: courtesy of Sara Iacopini.

– referring to “situations where a group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing” – and “participatory performance” – a practice where “there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role” (Turino, 2008, p. 26). Of course, Demerit performed on stage, with amplification, presenting their artistic work to the audience: but the physical involvement of the participants, in terms of dance, pogo or other kinds of synchronous movement, was crucial to the performance, and an integral part of it. As the concert went on and reached its peak, the initial awkwardness disappeared, proxemics relations got looser: the “sonic bonding” (Turino, 2008, p. 3n) among the audience, and between audience and performers, seemed to grow tighter and tighter.

4. Conclusions

On top of that, Demerit is not just a punk rock band: it is a Chinese punk rock band.¹⁵ On Circolo Curiel’s stage, they stood like embodiments of transculturality itself, a peculiar incarnation of the multiplicity of cultural codes that shape Prato’s identity today. In fact, I think it was a perfect mixture of familiarity and difference that drew those crowds to Circolo Curiel that night. The Italians, familiar with the codes of a punk show and thus attracted by the concert *per se*, were further drawn by the difference represented by a Chinese band and a Chinese neighbourhood (adjacent restaurant Ravioli Liu was unusually packed with Italians that night), in a blend of exoticism and socio-political interest; while the Chinese audience, who felt at home in Macrolotto Zero, were attracted by the unique blend of familiarity and difference represented by seeing a group of “compatriots” involved in a quite unfamiliar act. Despite they didn’t master the cultural codes of a punk concert, they didn’t leave: did they feel they belonged there? In any case, their openness to unfamiliarity was indeed rewarded when Li Yang, the singer of a band that in 2008 released an album called *Bastards of the Nation*, sang the Chinese national anthem for them. He then went on singing “Bandiera Rossa” and “Bella Ciao”, famous Italian communist songs, further nourishing the long series of cultural short circuits that made that night unique, proving that identification and otherness are fluid concepts that can fruitfully overlap.

The recipe of the success of Demerit’s concert was indeed perfect: it also took a very big effort from the organizers. They all agree it could not be repeated. Other concerts Santa Valvola later organized involving Chinese rock bands failed to attract that kind of crowd, both in terms of numbers and mixed composition. Prato’s contradictions are far from being positively resolved. But I believe this experiment traced a path for music to be an important tool for social bonding for the communities living the city.

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¹⁵ For the history and features of punk rock in China see Jeffords (2010), O’Dell (2014), Xiao (2018) and Zuccheri (2004). See also O’Connor (2002) for an analysis of “travelling punk”.

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