

Art in China Town

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I was born in the United States to parents who immigrated from China to study science, and ended up working in the San Francisco Bay Area's tech industry. I first learned about Prato's Chinese community through a *New Yorker* article on the pronto moda industry and its "Made in Italy" garments made by Chinese-run factories. At Prato's story, I wondered, what is the role of the arts in immigrant life, when immigrants like my parents often migrate for economic, sometimes survival reasons? Are these garments that the Chinese Pratesi make creative or purely economic?

Thanks to a Fulbright Fellowship, I came to Prato from October 2019-March 2020. I was touched by how welcoming people were – Italian, Chinese, and otherwise – to a stranger who had spent only a few months learning Italian on the Internet. But when I told them my interests, a common response was, "Chinese here aren't interested in art." The first generation, like my parents, migrated to work, and the second generation is subsequently enlisted in the family business.

The entrance to Chinatown from Prato's centro is colorful. Wedding supplies stores and photography studios with pink, feminine signs display red and white gowns, sparkling through the glass windows. Off a side street is an Italian-run photography gallery, dryphoto. Dryphoto was established in 1977 but moved to Chinatown in 2011, the director Vittoria Ciolini told me, because it was more *vivo*, less middle class.

Since moving, dryphoto has organized several site-specific artistic interventions aimed at bringing together the Italian and Chinese communities. It's 2015 "Piazza dell'Immaginario" project converted an unused Chinatown parking lot into a public space, and in 2018 and 2019, it held the residency "La Via della Cina," where photographers were guided by local Chinese high school students to shoot photos of Chinatown.

I attended the 2019 La Via della Cina artists' talk at the Centro Pecci art museum with my friend G., a second-generation Chinese high school student living in Prato. Her parents run a pronto moda factory, and she's a diligent student who wants to attend college and study economics. The

room was packed with Italians, with the notable exceptions of some Chinese teenagers, who greeted attendees at the door, then sat in a middle row. These were the photographers' guides, introduced as the "protagonisti" of the project when the talk started. They stood for a round of applause, then remained seated for the rest, while the artists – the Polish Magda Typiak, Chinese Ai Teng, and Italians Chiara De Maria and Andrea Palummo – presented their work.

Typiak shot a series of photographs called "Figure Out," to indicate the trouble she had accessing her subjects. The photographs are black-and-white and mediated: through a barred window, a windshield, or tanks at the fish market. What's past the glass is partially obscured by reflections. Her scenes are lifeless, the faces unidentifiable except for a single shot of a sleeping supermarket cashier. Her words interpreted from English to Italian for the talk, Typiak said that she was particularly interested in shooting slots stores, hair salons, and my favorite wedding supplies stores because she felt that these sites of "instant pleasure" must imply some underlying sadness.



Teng grew up in China and moved to Florence to study art around seven years ago. For her series “Prato Vacation”, she posed herself in various Chinatown scenes, getting her hair done, operating a cash register, or cooking in a restaurant kitchen. Unlike Typiak’s, Teng’s photos are bright and vivid, and center not the landscape but the people who make it a home.



De Maria and Palummo shot a video in two parts: first, interviews with Italian residents of Chinatown complaining about the dirt and noise that Chinese have brought to their neighborhood, spliced with shots of trash on the street and stickers advertising sex workers, with traffic horns audible in the background. Then, the video transitions to a slideshow of static

portraits of the Chinese student guides, over which each student can be heard describing how soon at age 18, they will choose between applying for Italian citizenship or remaining a Chinese citizen.

After the event, G. and I debriefed at a McDonald's across the street. She generally didn't like the artworks. She disliked how some works seemed to focus on the dirtiest, seediest parts of Chinatown, like the stickers advertising sex workers. And she said that she found the students' portraits unflatteringly serious: "They looked like funeral photos! They should have used travel photos or selfies."



In February 2020, I interviewed some of the Chinese student guides in the 2018 and 2019 "La Via Della Cina" residences. We met at their school in Chinatown and I brought my favorite Chinese dessert, egg tarts, to share, though I ended up eating most of them. They told me that they participated in the residences because it satisfied their school's internship requirement. They weren't particularly interested in art or photography.

Most of the students didn't live in Chinatown, nor spend much time there, because they went straight home after school to study. Hence they struggled to serve as guides, because they couldn't explain much about the place or its history. Some of the photographers asked to be taken to the pronto moda factories, but the students told them that the Chinese workers wouldn't like that. Some of the photographers also asked the students to interpret requests to photograph people on the street, but they were refused. Hence, many of the photos – like Typiak's – ended up featuring mostly buildings.

Generally the students told me that they found the experience uncomfortable, and wouldn't recommend it to their peers. Like G., they felt that some of the works portrayed Chinatown negatively. And they were concerned that their names and faces were attached to these portrayals. What if other members of the Chinese community found out? What if these people thought that the students were criticizing their own community? Thankfully, the students said, media coverage of the residencies used their Italian names, and excluded photos of the students themselves—one student had requested as much to their teacher.

And the students agreed with G.'s assessment of the portraits: "Maybe they're not very good photographers!" one wondered.

I asked if participating in the residencies changed their attitudes toward art at all. "Not at all," they said. Do you like photography? What photos do you take? "My dog. Travel. Food." We added each other on WeChat afterward, and I could see some of these photos of their everyday lives.

Using art to bridge cultures is an admirable but tricky endeavor. Dryphoto is a sort of pioneer for, unlike the Italian residents interviewed by De Maria and Palumbo, choosing to move into Chinatown after it was established as an ethnic enclave, and subsequently making efforts to engage with the community. It is understandable that these efforts aren't immediately successful, that at the moment, both the Chinese student guides and Chinese passersby on the street are more concerned with privacy than interested in participating in public art spearheaded by an unfamiliar Italian institution. A community that is both insular and marginalized will be wary of outside eyes, since those eyes have a history of seeing that community negatively. This may in turn feed stereotypes, as outsiders,

lacking live data, project their own assumptions – like Typiak’s hypothesis that Chinese sites of pleasure indicate sadness.

In other words, the idea that “not many Chinese are interested in art” may be a function of a feedback loop between the Chinese community and those who perceive them, in addition to economic motivations—running a business, being successful in school—trumping artistic ones. But this feedback loop is also based in a particular, narrow idea of art. We must be careful not to exclude from the idea of art what’s already present in the Chinese community, but just imperceptible as such to outsiders. There may not be galleries in Chinatown besides dryphoto, but art doesn’t have to be in a gallery or museum to be art. It can be in a beautiful wedding designed by the many wedding supplies stores in Chinatown, or in the high schoolers’ photos and selfies on social media. In these works, the artists don’t run into issues of privacy, because they are representing themselves to their own communities