

# Constructing Narratives of Chineseness in Prato (Italy) During COVID-19

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*This article discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to construct narratives of Chineseness and reshape intercultural relations in Prato (Italy). Prato is a textile industrial district featuring a multicultural population and one of the most debated case-study for Chinese migration to Europe. We cast light on the malleability of the concept of ethnic identities during the year marked by the pandemic by relying on emerging narratives using a longitudinal analysis of social media coverage and a series of in-depth interviews to expert informants, from which four different framings emerged. As our analysis suggests, a narrative of difference has initially relied upon a dramatization of a conflictual understanding of Italian-Chinese relationships at the beginning of 2020. Later on, a new narrative took shape, namely that of an exemplary behavior by the “Chinese community”. Towards the end of the year, when restrictive measures were gradually lifted, a new discursive distancing became evident, as the spotlight fell, once again, on the differences of two communities, the local and the “ethnic” one. Nevertheless, a new type of consciousness seems to slowly remain, with the potential to significantly change pre-existing intercultural relations.*

## *Introduction*

In January 2020, a video filmed in Florence, Italy, went viral. In the video, a man verbally abuses a group of Asian tourists and exhorts them to “go cough at home” and “stop infecting us in every way”<sup>1</sup>. The year 2020 had just begun, which was also the Italy-China Year of Culture and Tourism on the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations. After the Chinese authorities reported the novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan (Hubei) at the end of December 2019, Chinese diasporic communities began experiencing verbal attacks, discrimination, and even physical aggression (Grasso *et al.* 2021). Similarly, Chinese in Prato (second most-populated urban center in the region of Tuscany, and home to one of Europe’s largest populations of citizens with Chinese origins) began to attract scrutiny from both national right-wing parties and the media. This became particularly evident when around 2,000 Chinese returned to Italy after celebrating the Chinese New Year in China in February 2020. At this time, «many expected Prato to become the Italian epicentre of the virus outbreak» (Leonardi, Marchetti 2021).

As researchers who are interested in the analysis of social change and the configuration of cosmopolitan futures, we are aware of both the necessity to think about the increasing complexification of contemporary societies, and the challenges that this process entails. In this case, we frame this episode of the interpretation of a dangerous and unwanted Asian body and identity within a specific discourse on difference-making that intensified at a time of crisis. By widening the lens and looking at the context in which this narrative was produced, as well as how it circulated and was re-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://youmedia.fanpage.it/video/aa/XjMgk-Sw54zoQxk4>.

elaborated on the ground throughout the year 2020, we wish to provide incisive insights into localized processes of ethnic representations and identity construction. Our research revolves around Prato, a city neighboring the regional capital city of Florence to the west. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the city's growth has been spurred by the textile manufacturing industry and following that, between the 1970s and the early 2000, characterized by the fragmentation of the production system and urban expansion – which at a socioeconomic level can be explained as a localized manifestation of the decline of the Marshallian district model – having indelible consequences on the city (Bressan 2019). These processes have become more visible since the start of the new millennium when, in the context of a slow economic transition, the Chinese diaspora in Prato became stabilized.

The contemporary entanglements between Prato's economy and Chinese migration have found much space on the social science agenda, producing nuanced accounts of inter-ethnic relationships against the backdrop of a changing city (Dei Ottati 2014; Ceccagno 2015; Chen 2015; Krause 2015; Lan 2015). The outbreak of COVID-19 provided an opportunity to further analyze these relations. The generative effects arising from Chinese-Italian encounters during the state of emergency were noted by Krause and Bressan (2020) and Leonardi and Marchetti (2021). Another topic debated at the time of the pandemic was the mobilization of a discourse about Chinese diasporic communities as direct extensions of a totalitarian state, activating responses in times of crisis through a typically Chinese “grid reaction” (Ceccagno, Salvati 2020). Finally, Guidi (2020) observed that the resilience shown by the Chinese migrant population during the pandemic effectively contrasted the spread of xenophobia. Despite these intensified efforts to understand the Chinese migratory realities in the city, and in Italy more in general, not enough evidence has been provided to account for both the malleability of the concept of ethnicity and the increasingly diversified meanings assigned to it, especially following a period in which «the impact of scientific modalities on uncertainty and risk, the interplay of public health and national security and the dynamics of health governance» (Dingwall *et al.* 2012, 172) influenced how inter-ethnic relationships are reconfigured in culturally complex urban contexts.

When the first national lockdown was still in effect (March-May 2020), we reflected on the possibility for new patterns of coexistence by analyzing the Chinese-Italian relations during the early stage of the emergency (Leonardi, Marchetti 2021). What we do here is to extend the reflection to the entire pandemic year and to consider the changes that occurred as the pandemic experiences evolved (end of the lockdown, gradual reopening of businesses and schools, increasing possibility of movement, start of vaccine communication campaigns).

In what follows we explain how Appadurai's (1990) mediascape theory is suited to our research objective, which is to analyze the construction of Chineseness narratives in the local public sphere. Then, after describing the research methods, we present a temporal breakdown of the four framings (“alien minority”, “model community”, “managed diversity”, “emplaced ethnicity”) emerging from the content analysis of the articles posted on the Facebook page of a local, online newspaper in the pandemic year. These framings help explain how the construction of narratives around Chineseness evolved in the city of Prato throughout 2020, when Italian-Chinese

relations in Prato were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The data analysis is supplemented with insights from qualitative interviews with expert informants, with Chinese or Italian background, in the fields of education, culture, politics and business in Prato.

### *1. Identity and the mediascape*

During the pandemic, our attention was captured by the intensification of a narrative concerning Chinese-Italian relations and how this narrative was made visible through the circulation of literary, cinematic, and other cultural elements on an increasingly high number of devices. We are referring here to what Appadurai (1990, 296) has called the “mediascape”, namely one of the many “flows” that enable us to observe the reconfiguration of our globalized world as a “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order”. According to Appadurai, mediascapes offer those who experience and transform them a series of elements that help «constitute *narratives of the “other”* and proto narratives of possible lives» (1990, 299, authors’ italics). The generative effects of the mediascape on a consolidated reality such as Chinese global migration have been outlined in a seminal work by Sun (2002), who considered the ways in which the mobility of people, capital, and images from China has affected localities worldwide through Chinese migrants’ construction of a sense of place; Sun’s analysis focuses both on how the Chinese in China fantasize about faraway or unknown places, and how those on the move remember experiences of familiar places through media production. Here, like Appadurai, Sun (2002, 5) highlights the fact that «when the movement of people and the flow of images are brought together, [...] the meanings of place, space, community, and nation become unstable and contestable».

Mediascape studies on the Italian context, with Chinese identities as the research focus, abound on the social research agenda. According to Pedone (2018), since the mid-2000s media representations of Chineseness have played a fundamental role in the analysis of the Chinese diasporic population in Italy, together with the growing number of Chinese citizens and the economic success of their ethnic enterprises. The impact of a mediascape made of a differentiated body of practices and messages has contributed to the multiplication of gazes on Chinese migratory realities and the interpretation of Chinese ethnic identities in Italy: in some cases, documentaries and TV shows have been interpreted as mostly focusing on the Italian fear of the other, highlighting the orientalist approach (Said 1978) to discussing ethnicity through «guided interviews or ad hoc editing, merely to reassure the Italian society that the [Chinese] presence is innocuous and [...] economically advantageous» (Pedone 2018, 84). In other cases, TV shows have been believed to contribute to the understanding of the experience of Chinese-Italian second generations and their complex role in mediating between the host society and the first generations of Chinese migrants (Giuliani 2019). Lastly, Chinese TV series filmed in Italy have been studied as important portraits of Europe, shedding light on the influence of Chinese television on how Europeans and transnational Chinese families, and their interactions with non-Chinese cultures, are seen in China (Varriano 2016).

Analysis of media coverage of the Chinese migratory experience has been another prism through which the effects of the mediascape on the Chinese migratory experience in Italy have been observed. Zhang (2019) concentrated his analysis on the

period 1992 to 2012, using Italian-migrant and local-global frames to structure the ways in which journalists selected and highlighted the topics, events, and perspectives in the debate over the Chinese migrant settlement in Italy. Zhang's work interestingly underlines the centrality of Prato in this context; he observes how the mediatic attention on the Chinese settlement in the city was significantly contextualized in a period in which Prato's Italian ready-to-wear clothing firms were losing market appeal. In this case, the media listened to a multiplicity of voices that ranged from nativist statements urging that the manufacturing of Made in Italy label products be limited to Italian hands, to pro-migrant advocates arguing for a redefinition of what Made in Italy should mean (Zhang 2019). This heated debate culminated in 2009, when the first city's right-wing government was elected (Bracci 2016), and a massive number of police raids on Chinese-owned factories exacerbated existing controversies.

## 2. Research methods

The data discussed in this article were collected in 2021 and originate from a mixed-method research project which relied on a quantitative online content analysis and qualitative semi-structured interviews with expert informants (both online and face to face). The mixed method gave us the opportunity to deepen the results of the content analysis with the subjective perceptions of the expert informants.

At a time of constant travel restrictions in Italy, it was both a necessity and an opportunity to observe the unfolding of a narrative on otherness on social media. In particular, the fervor surrounding the topic of ethnicity at the time of the pandemic pushed us to get as close as possible to the cacophony of voices that were producing messages, news, and meanings. Our research turned to the exploration of discursive practices of ethnicity on Facebook: difference-making narratives targeting the Chinese population became particularly visible on this platform right before the outbreak of the pandemic and in the months immediately after. Hence, following Franz et al.'s (2019) methodological review on the use of social networks as sources of research, we used a type of analysis privileging the observation of information patterns over the recruitment of participants.

We looked at the *Notizie di Prato* (translated as Prato's News) media outlet, an apolitical online newspaper that started in 2009. It covers traditional journalistic topics: news, current affairs, politics, economics and sport and is present on three digital platforms: a website, a Youtube channel, and a Facebook public group page. Our analysis was conducted only on *Notizie di Prato* Facebook page, which reaches a considerable share of the city's audience. In June 2021, 75,021 people followed *Notizie di Prato* on its Facebook page. We started by collecting all of the posts relating to the pandemic situation, filtering our analysis using the following keywords: pandemic, COVID-19, coronavirus, emergency, lockdown, contagion, isolation, virus, face masks, distancing, gathering, restrictions, vaccine, anti-contagion, COVID test and red zone. Once all of the posts (totaling 515) had been collected, we categorized them according to the main recurring themes. The next step was to isolate news relating to the construction of Chinese otherness; in turn, these data became the basis for observing the different themes that made up the mosaic of this discourse during COVID-19 in the Prato context.

The methods we used were inspired by other research projects carried out in Prato that aimed to tackle identity formation from a constructivist perspective via the analysis of social media content. Through a critical analysis of YouTube content, for instance, Bellini and Leonardi (2020) observed how videos can be used to destabilize the dominant narrative of the city's identity and the social construction of the landscape. Their analysis focused on the narration of the city identity, revealing that, in the case of Prato, this process is accompanied by a new geography of the places, landscapes, and spaces of the city, redrawn by the flows and settlements of people, especially new Chinese immigrants.

Our analysis drew also inspiration from the approach adopted by Carta di Roma (2021)<sup>2</sup>, which was based on critical observation of the “framings” – namely the “categorization and comparison mechanism” – of recurring words to describe events and conceptual structures in the mediascape.

The choice to look specifically at the articles posted on Notizie di Prato's Facebook page stems from the consideration that social media platforms are occupying an increasingly central position not only in the design of academic methods for social research (Nantwich, König 2014), but more generally in the way in which news has circulated since the outbreak of the pandemic (Carelli, Vittadini 2020). Researchers point to the fact that the use of Facebook for academic purposes is rapidly growing as it facilitates the collection of data (Kosinski *et al.* 2015), which, with the participants' consent, can be conveniently recorded for a number of studies in different disciplines (Giglietto *et al.* 2012). However, the research methods used for more traditional sources of qualitative data need to be adapted in order to conduct an analysis of text content from Facebook users. In a review of the social sciences studies that had used this social platform, for instance, Franz *et al.* (2019) noted technical issues (for example, a lack of familiarity with manual or automated coding techniques) and, more generally, problems with the research orientations (few studies are reported to analyze social exchanges of generated and received texts between users, such as chains of communication on a user's timeline or feed). Therefore, using Facebook as a tool of research appears as much a challenge as an opportunity for social researchers who are more familiar with qualitative methodologies. In our research, for instance, the production of textual content on Facebook allowed us to distinguish macro-themes that in turn helped us find our way in a complex field of meaning-making in a time of emergency. Hence, we were able to dive into the field in a way that more traditional ethnographic approaches (participant, non-participant observation, and informal conversations) would have otherwise not allowed us to do.

Semi-structured interviews with expert informants were important to further inquire into the narrative components that we singled out. We recruited 5 profiles that could give the widest possible representation of the social, economic, and cultural landscapes of Prato's Chinese-Italian entanglements: 1) an Italian local politician of Chinese background; 2) the Chinese-national director of a private school; 3) the Italian secretary of a Chinese religious association; 4) an Italian principal of a high school

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<sup>2</sup> The Carta di Roma Report (2021) considered various dimensions of news circulation in Italy with a special focus on the impact of the pandemic. It looked at newspapers (front pages, the topics in focus, the words most used in the article headings, and the most prevalent semantic spheres), TV programs (analysis of TV news programs), and social media (focusing on Instagram).

attended by the offspring of many Chinese migrant workers who reside in the city; and 5) a young Chinese-national restaurant owner. This phase of the research followed the content analysis and served a twofold purpose: 1) to understand whether the results of the content analysis aligned or misaligned with the subjective perceptions of the expert informants; 2) to collect their personal experiences, opinions and accounts of events in everyday life during the pandemic year. The interviews were conducted in Italian and in Chinese, and lasted for an average of one hour; with the consent of the interviewees, they were recorded and transcribed.

In conclusion, on a practical level, we first of all highlighted what kind of framings emerged during the social narration of the pandemic; we then considered the “constructing the narrative of Chinese diversity” framing, while trying to understand which micro-narratives made up this framing.

### 3. Constructing narratives of Chineseness

As explained before, the analysis is focused on 515 articles posted by the *Notizie di Prato* local news outlet on its Facebook page in the pandemic year, from January 21, 2020 (date of the first post) to December 31, 2020 (date of the last post). Five main themes emerged. As figure 1 shows, the percentage of themes out of the overall number of posts is rather homogenous: not surprisingly, the largest part of the posts concerned the daily number of people infected, deceased, or recovered (all nested under the “bulletin” category), amounting to more than one fourth of the total (26%); these were followed by “general information”, namely posts relating to general citizen information and “local news” (both at 22%). Owing to the number of posts on the subject, the construction of “Chinese otherness” emerged as one of the main topics addressed during the pandemic; indeed, a total of 75 posts were nested under this label (a significant 15%), the same percentage as news about the economic impact of the pandemic on the local economy (“economic effects”).

Figure 1 – The five main themes

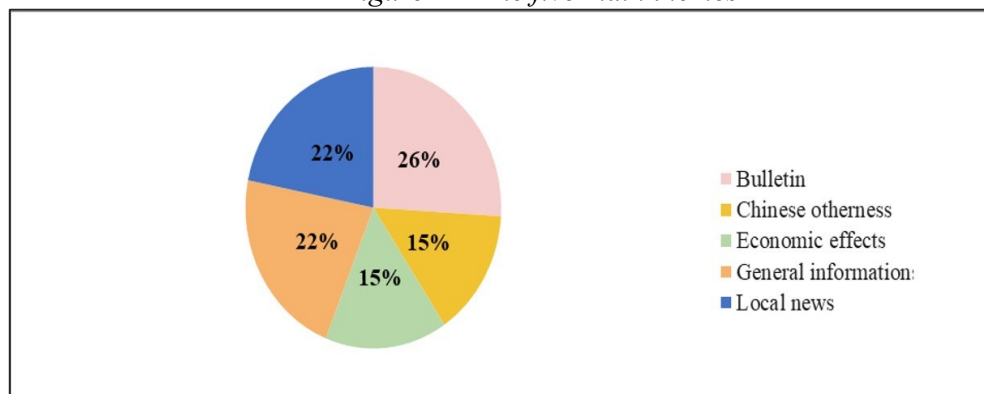
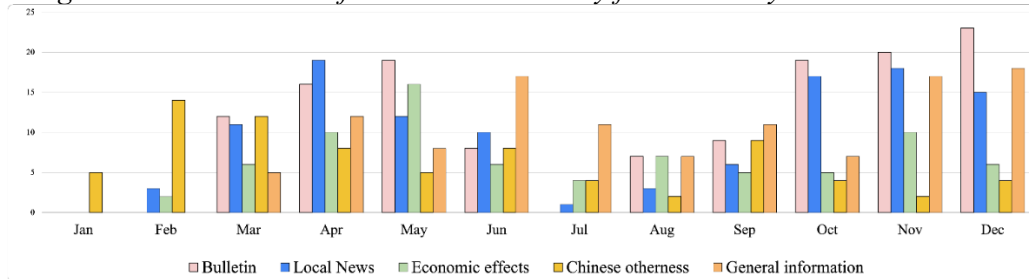


Figure 2 illustrates the temporal distribution of the framings across the months of the year 2020. Not all of the framings emerged with the same intensity throughout the course of the year: the construction of Chinese otherness, for instance, monopolized

the production of posts at the outbreak of the pandemic, particularly in the months of January and February.

*Figure 2 – Distribution of the themes’ intensity from January to December 2020*



March was one of the most balanced months in terms of the distribution of the framings, with all five represented almost equally (despite the prevalence of posts giving the medical bulletin, local news and news related to Chinese ethnic otherness). In April, local news dominated the mediascape at the core of our investigation: in fact, as lockdown measures were introduced, the local responses to the unprecedented restrictions produced a significant number of posts. In May there was a prevalence of news focusing on the quantitative effects of the pandemic, showing a growing interest in monitoring COVID-19 cases; significantly, too, the economic effects of the pandemic were given much attention at this stage, a fact signaling the intention to show how the local, regional, and national economies were coping with the state of emergency after the first wave of contagions. On the contrary, in the summer (especially in the months of June and July), posts with useful information for the citizenry were prioritized over the other framings. In September, the frequency of framings started to diversify again, and showed an interesting return of the Chinese framing; lastly, as the second wave of contagions kicked in at the beginning of the fall, the focus shifted again to the number of deaths and contagions, local news and – particularly in November and December – useful news for citizens.

With the “constructing narratives of Chineseness” framing, we intend to address the complex universe of meaning production that emerged from the total of 75 posts (“Chinese otherness”) during the year 2020 in which Chinese identity, Chinese migration and, more generally, the Chinese presence in Prato were either the main topic of the post, or a significant part of it. Figures 3 and 4, where these findings are summarized, show a subdivision of this framing into smaller framings, each characterized by a specific meaning assigned to Chinese ethnicity.

Figure 3 – Internal division of the framings in the “constructing narratives of Chineseness” group

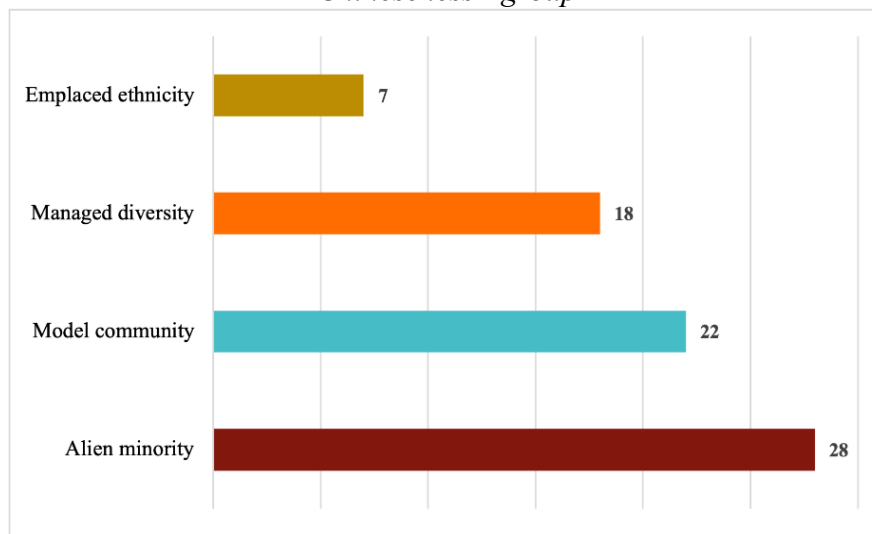
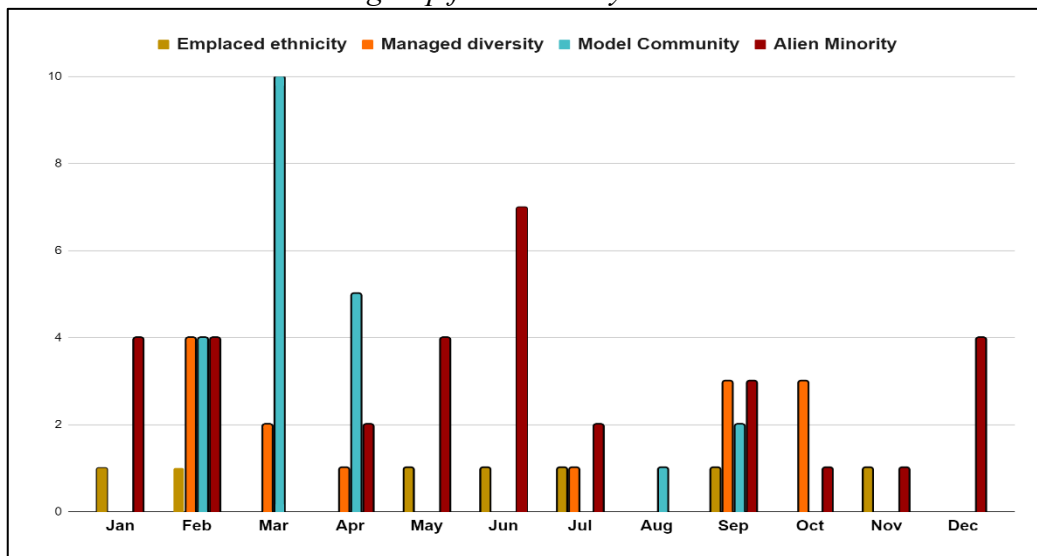


Figure 4 – Distribution of the framing intensity of the “constructing narratives of Chineseness” group from January to December 2020



In the following pages we present the four emerging narratives (“alien minority”, “model community”, “managed diversity”, “emplaced ethnicity”) to cast light on the malleability of the concept of ethnic identities during the year marked by the pandemic.

### 3.1 Alien minority

In early 2020, the main framing concerned the Chinese as an “alien minority” (28 posts out of 75), with a dramatization of anti-Chinese sentiments resulting from a mixed global anti-Chinese narrative (Horton 2020; Rich 2020; Fan, Yu and Gilliland



2023), which included depictions of Chinese migrants as virus importers<sup>3</sup>. This trend is reflected in other studies that have looked at the surge of negative perceptions of Chineseness in Europe: a wide-scale study of public opinion in 13 European countries in September and October 2020, for example, revealed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in shaping European imageries and showed that, in countries like Italy, France, the UK, and Germany, the health-related emergency was reported to be the most common association with China (Turcsányi et al. 2020).

Among the informants we interviewed, the young entrepreneur (who runs a well-known Chinese restaurant in the city center of Prato) had no hesitation to say that racism dominates the relationships between Italians and Chinese in the city right before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. His opinion was echoed by the local politician that we interviewed; he, too, considered how the presence of ethnic Chinese in the city was treated, especially in the news, as problematic:

*«When you check the local news on Prato and a Chinese person has done something bad, there are hundreds of comments; if an Italian does the same thing, there are hardly any comments, or maybe none at all. I mean, that's how things are here».* (The Italian politician of Chinese background).

The way in which these respondents perceived the descriptions of people of Chinese background in the public discourse has been amplified with the beginning of the pandemic. At this time, as we already noted, a considerable number of Chinese residents of Prato were waiting to return to Italy after their visit to China during the Chinese New Year celebrations. The Italian representative of a Chinese religious association in Prato reported to us that everyone in Prato was expecting the pandemic to start as a result of that.

*«“It's coming here,” they said, “they are the China virus.” This was the time when, in collaboration with the local police forces, we founded the observatory against Sinophobia to tackle various forms of online and offline abuse. [...] We collected a series of warnings across Italy, and we realized that the phenomenon was growing».* (The Italian secretary of a Chinese religious association).

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<sup>3</sup> Here are the titles translated into English of the 28 articles considered: ‘Maxi seizure of clams and fish: shellfish brought in a suitcase from China’; ‘Coronavirus, the kiss on the mouth during the radio show’; ‘Alia's appeal: the masks must be disposed of in the undifferentiated’; ‘Labor exploitation, police arrest two entrepreneurs’; ‘The infected are few and among them there is only one Chinese’; ‘Carabinieri raid in a factory: 27 thousand masks destined for the French market seized’; ‘With the resumption of production activities also resumes the illegal activity of transporting and abandoning textile waste’; ‘They gamble in a private house: denounced and fined for assembling’; ‘Open stores, fined two hairdressers in the Macrolotto Zero area’; ‘They produce masks illegally but without wearing them and not respecting safety protocols’; ‘The great fest of masks, Prosecutor Nicolosi: only goal is the principle of economic utility’; ‘Mask fraud, wave of reactions. The mayor: The city has the antibodies against illegality’; ‘The facemasks scam, a 45 million contract’; ‘Facemasks investigation, the parade of suspects before the judge is over: first admissions’; ‘Facemasks investigation, Fdl's attack: complaint to the Public Prosecutor's Office and questioning in parliament’; ‘Police unveils 44 evaders’; ‘Gambling addiction’; ‘Facemasks investigation, machinery seized from contractors is back in operation’; ‘More than 900 thousand masks ready to be given to Prato residents but the prefecture's approval is missing’; ‘Violent robberies in the street, a twenty-one year old in handcuffs. Six other gang members investigated’; ‘COVID-19: positive swabs in Prato, one is a Chinese entrepreneur: the Prato community is panicking’; ‘Maxi seizure of designer masks: the brands had been falsified (the operation of the police started from the control of a van at Macrolotto)’; ‘Another seizure of masks with counterfeit brands in a Macrolotto fashion department’; ‘Citizen detective exposes massage parlor’; ‘Dealing shaboo during curfew: forty-year-old arrested by police’; ‘Goods worth 50 thousand euros seized from a shop by the police’; ‘The lockdown causes crimes to collapse: here are the 2020 numbers from the Carabinieri’; ‘Gathering in a games room, the owner reported and customers fined’.

Initiatives like the Center Against Sinophobia<sup>4</sup> were the direct response to a series of instances of verbal and physical abuse that Chinese residents in the city had to endure as the rhetoric of the “China virus” and the idea of the Chinese migrant as a virus importer gained ground: «The Italians used to say “the Chinese virus” or daub “Chinese go away!” on the walls». «Some Chinese were even beaten up just because they were wearing a face mask in front of the supermarket», our participant continued. The idea of Chinese migrants as an alien minority was amplified by material symbols relating to the pandemic situation, which was directly recalled by the use of face masks among Chinese residents in the city even before they became mandatory for the entire population. The Chinese were subject to abuse and discursive practices that distanced them from the society in which they had lived for years; once again, the case of our informant, who had been living in Italy since the age of nine (he was 21 at the time of the interview), is telling:

*«Before the outbreak of the pandemic, when there were no cases here, I got verbally abused by a lady on the street; I wasn't wearing a face mask and she shouted to me: “You, Chinese, go to the other side of the road!” At the beginning of the pandemic, when we started to work with masks on, there were people saying to me: “We come to your restaurant and trust you, and you're wearing a mask because you think we're not clean? Are you crazy?” Still today, I receive phone calls at the restaurant from people who ask me if I serve bat soup». (The young Chinese-national restaurant owner).*

The young restaurateur's description of the attitude toward him during this period shows how revolutionary the next change in framing is, as is highlighted in the following section.

### 3.2 Model Community

“Model community” is the second framing used to interpret the construction of Chinese otherness (22 posts out of the 75 collected)<sup>5</sup>. It started to emerge strongly from

<sup>4</sup> When cases of Sinophobia began to intensify in early 2020, the observatory, which now, to our knowledge, is no longer active, aimed to collect legal complaints regarding cases of violence, racism and intolerance.

<sup>5</sup> Here are the titles translated into English of the 22 articles considered: ‘Coronavirus alert: Buddhist temple creates racism observatory’; ‘Nineteen Chinese friendship associations present in Prato have taken steps to send ten thousand containment masks to Wenzhou. At the same time they are asking compatriots back home for New Year to wait to leave again’; ‘230 children returned from China are home in voluntary isolation’; ‘Coronavirus, mayor: “The Chinese are more afraid than we are but the community is behaving responsibly”’; ‘Coronavirus, Chinese businesses ready to close for a week or two after word of mouth on WeChat’; ‘Prato Chinese donate a thousand masks and 200 litres of sanitizer to Prato hospital’; ‘Chinese neighbor gives masks to the whole street’; ‘At 11 o'clock this morning already more than 830 donors, among them many Chinese and other nationalities, a clear sign of how the emergency has cemented the sense of community of everyone living in Prato’; ‘Coronavirus, collection for the hospital's intensive care unit at 100 thousand euros. So many gestures of solidarity, the beautiful initiative of Chinese families bringing masks to their neighbors continues’; ‘Medical supplies arrived from Wenzhou donated to the city by the Chinese Friendship Association of Prato’; ‘Everyone in line to pick up masks, here's the new donation from the Chinese Evangelical Church’; ‘Team of Chinese doctors operative in Tuscany until next Monday. A stop-off in Prato is on the list’; ‘Today the delegation from Fujian Provincial Hospital engaged in a tour of Tuscany to give advice on how to deal with the emergency: “It is the best hospital among those seen so far”’; ‘Chinese doctors visiting Palazzo Buonamici: “The virus must also be tackled on the territory with blanket swabs”’; ‘Masks to carabinieri and hospital workers, solidarity from a Chinese entrepreneur’; ‘Appeal to the government: “Prato restarts as soon as possible. The people of Prato have shown they can cope with the coronavirus”’; ‘With two donations delivered a total of 140 thousand pieces thanks to the generosity of the Buddhist association and from a local company’; ‘Xinhua dedicated an article to the community present in the city interviewing the mayor and an entrepreneur’; ‘One hundred thousand masks to the city from the Evangelical

March onwards, when the representation of Chineseness was connected to praise for the outstanding behavior of Prato's Chinese residents in adopting a proper response to the virus that could even "teach a lesson" on civil liability. Emblematic of this discursive moment was the public message by the mayor of Prato thanking the Chinese community in a post titled "普拉托市长感谢华人社区 pulatuo shizhang ganxie huaren shequ" (Prato mayor thanks the Chinese community) that we retrieved from WeChat:

*«Every act of solidarity is valuable but acts of solidarity performed at a hard time such as the one we are going through right now hold even greater significance. For this reason, I really want to thank the Chinese community of Prato, which is doing its best to look for funds, economic resources, and material resources for our health system. For us this really means a lot and we are truly grateful for it. On behalf of the whole community, I thank you, hoping that this nightmare will end soon»* (Translation from Italian by the first author).

The fact that this post was retrieved by the Chinese-language social media is emblematic, as it proves how a moment of difficulty increased diplomacy. Our observation of other online-generated content in Chinese<sup>6i</sup> reveals how, in these months, much attention was given to news praising the way in which the virus was kept in check in Tuscany. The "alien minority" narrative was thus gradually replaced by one that focused on the outstanding contribution of the Chinese in containing the virus, especially when their acts of responsibility fell under the spotlight. As Leonardi and Marchetti (2021) observe, Chinese in Prato went into lockdown starting as early as the end of January, almost two months before the official lockdown. They closed shops, supermarkets and stores at a time when the native population of Prato still believed that the novel Coronavirus was akin to a flu. What motivated the Chinese population in Prato to act responsively was in particular the threat of xenophobic attacks (Leonardi, Marchetti 2021). Chinese migrants living in the city were also knowledgeable about effective ways to cope with quarantine and were used to adopting self-protecting measures, like wearing masks in public to protect themselves from smog or to avoid transmitting flu viruses. Whereas in pre-COVID times mask-wearing was a feature marking a line between the Chinese and non-Chinese population, the meaning changed completely at the height of the pandemic. As quarantine measures were enforced, ultimate gifts of solidarity characterized the behavior of the Chinese in the city. When stocks of masks ran out nationally, many Prato residents found in their mail boxes masks gifted to them by their Chinese neighbors. Wearing face masks became everyone's everyday routine and the face mask transformed its meaning in Prato: from a symbol of division to one of unity (Leonardi, Marchetti 2021).

The main reason that the paradigm of the model community emerged was the outstanding contribution in tackling the spread of the virus made by Chinese residents, when «the health agency that traces healthcare in the region only documented a single case in all of the greater metropolitan area of central Tuscany» (Krause, Bressan 2020, 260). However, it is important to point out that this phase was anticipated by a series

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Chinese Church of Prato'; 'To return home requires swabbing, Chinese in line'; 'Four more cases among Chinese citizens who are undergoing mass screening after an entrepreneur's WeChat appeal'; 'Covid, Chinese are in a hurry to swab. On Pistoiese Street mobile center organized by the community'.

<sup>6</sup> Relying on the first author's knowledge of Chinese, posts and comments on Weibo and Ouhua Italy (a Chinese-language newspaper) were scrutinized during 2020.

of spontaneous actions at the local level that showed empathy and solidarity with the Chinese population as the intensity of the previously mentioned xenophobic acts increased. In Florence, for example, the performative protest of a young Chinese man, who stood blindfolded and invited passers-by to “hug a Chinese” to explicitly reject forms of stigma and xenophobia, resonated at the media level<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile in Prato, the most outspoken anti-racist responses were offered by young citizens: a dinner party, for instance, was organized by the youth branch of the Democratic Party at a famous Chinese restaurant; moreover, public contexts like schools proved to be important platforms on which collective displays of solidarity took place. The director of a Prato high school, which is attended by many students with Chinese origins, described this phase as follows:

*«In January/February, when we first started to hear about the consequences of COVID, we read of some conflicts on public transport between Italian people who didn't want to sit next to Chinese people. Before we adults even started to address this issue, our students did a really wonderful thing. Without anyone telling them anything, they started posting group photos on Facebook; group photos with Italian kids going to Chinese kids' houses to have breakfast together (for so long as it was allowed, obviously) [...] there was this intention to demonstrate that they were schoolmates, and that there was no trace of friction between them».* (The Italian principal of a high school).

As the pandemic spread further, and contagions and deaths increased considerably, Sino-Italian relationships were intensified and strengthened by a diplomacy of care, as material support travelled back and forth from Italy to China (“Team of Chinese doctors operative in Tuscany until next Monday. A stop-off in Prato is on the list” – *Notizie di Prato*, March 26, 2020). The Chinese-Italian politician that we involved in our research told us that this period brought the local and the migrant communities back together in the ‘singing on the balcony spirit’: the shared sense of solidarity that emerged from the first phase of lockdown, when viral videos on the Internet testified to a renaissance of community feeling in most Italian cities. Chinese community organizations in Prato also reached out and became points of references for others. This was the case of the Roma and Sinti community, to whom thousands of face masks were donated by the community organization that we involved in our research project. Meanwhile, aid from the Chinese population was orchestrated to support the northern Italian regions, where the public health system was under considerable pressure in the first lockdown phase:

*«The first thing we did as the first contagions happened in Codogno was to collect face masks and send them to Milan. We took detergents and other medical equipment to Niguarda hospital».* (The Italian secretary of a Chinese religious association).

In mid-March the pandemic had spread throughout the country, and Prato was no exception. Once again, the Chinese in Prato emerged as the most active agents in this network of mutual help that blossomed at the grassroots level. By using their manufacturing potential, many Chinese-led firms shifted their production to provide the equipment needed to face the pandemic:

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2505019822941361>

*«When face masks couldn't be found easily in Italy, we bought them in China and shipped them over here. Many Chinese converted their production lines to produce face masks. They're still producing them now. We gave face masks to many (Italian) families. Many Chinese work hard every day to produce masks that they give to their Italian neighbors for free». (The Chinese-national director of a private school).*

In this same period, the transnational ties established by Chinese migrant entrepreneurs gave a sense of connection with Prato and Italy, providing interesting insights on how the migration experience had produced strong ties between entrepreneurs based in Italy and those who had returned to China:

*«I got a phone call from the president of our association, who was in China at that time. He asked me: "What can I do for you?" "What do you need?" And I told him: "We really need face masks." In the end, money was collected in Wenzhou and I was told that an entrepreneur contributed a lot. He's the owner of a restaurant in Wenzhou called "Prato". He said: "Oh, the situation in Prato is bad?!" And he gave something like several thousand euros to contribute to this donation». (The Italian secretary of a Chinese religious association).*

The construction of Chineseness as a mark of otherness was no longer explicitly divisive as it had been with the alien minority narrative but was consolidated thanks to acts of solidarity shown in the face of an unprecedented crisis. This, as we have seen, was due to two main factors: on the one hand, the specific behavior displayed by citizens of Chinese origin highlighted by the media; on the other hand, the material exchange of knowledge and medical equipment to fight the virus became a first-time opportunity to overthrow the power asymmetries between Chinese migrants and Italian society rooted in the public imagination: the arrival of expert doctors and epidemiologists, for instance, exported the image of a politically and scientifically powerful China on its way out of the pandemic and started to influence how the Chinese "other" was seen. The impact that this framing had on some of the Chinese who live in Prato was elaborated with ambivalence, however. After explaining how happy he was to receive compliments from friends and clients who congratulated him for the excellent job that the Chinese had done in fighting the pandemic, one of our interviewees paused to reflect on one episode that had disturbed him:

*«My sister and I bought a lot of masks for the hospital, when they most needed them. [...] we gave them hundreds, or maybe thousands. I don't remember if it was the police or something... anyway, we were asked to sign a document that said that we were responsible if anything went wrong with those masks. Do you know what I mean? I mean, it's fair enough, but I found it disrespectful at the time». (The young Chinese-national restaurant owner).*

This last quote sheds light on the fact that even at a time when a construction of Chineseness as a model community prevailed, more or less explicit negative stereotypes towards the Chinese remained, in this case the assumption that Chinese goods are of low quality.

### *3.3 Managed diversity*

The alternation of framings throughout the year did not follow a linear trajectory; in other words, the first phase, with the mediascape monopolized by the production of posts on the Chinese alien minority, was not totally reversed by the emergence of the

model community framing: for instance, the alien minority framing emerged again during the month of September, when a major scandal concerning the production of counterfeited face masks tarred the rhetoric about the responsible, charitable ethnic community with the same derogatory brush as the depiction of the alien minority (“Face mask investigation, the seized machinery is back in operation” – *Notizie di Prato*, July 4, 2020). Furthermore, another framing emerged, producing different meanings of Chineseness: we labeled this “managed diversity” (counting 18 posts)<sup>8</sup>. These posts referred to how local institutions and the world of politics were associated with the experience of Chinese migrants and their presence in Prato and in Italy more in general during the pandemic.

The relationship of the local Chinese population with the school system was a central topic in this sense: amidst many debates around the reorganization of the school system for the upcoming academic year, for instance, the Chinese community “was still afraid” and, according to a WeChat survey, 94% of Chinese parents were not going to send their children to school (Huang 2020). Two themes, therefore, appeared to be particularly debated with a shared sense of urgency and contributed to shaping a new narrative: the first referred to uncertainty over economic and personal reorganization as the virus caused the reconsideration of personal migratory trajectories as the global economy was impacted by the pandemic. The second related to collective contexts such as school attendance and vaccination campaigns, both terrains upon which news and rumors were spreading, characterized by a shared constructed feature of the local Chinese population: its tendency to disappear.

It is significant that the managed diversity framing signaled a second sharp U-turn in the conceptualization of Chineseness in the period of emergency: once the restrictive measures imposed on mobility were lifted, this framing once again reversed the meanings attached to ethnic otherness from good (model) to bad (disloyal). While the Chinese migrants’ initial response to the pandemic was interpreted as a sense of commitment to the local community, many Chinese families’ response to the reopening of schools (their suspicion towards the measures taken by the Italian school system to tackle the virus) was read as a betrayal towards the host community. In other words, the Chinese body’s subtraction from the public institutions once again

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<sup>8</sup> Here are the titles translated into English of the 18 articles considered: ‘Region and Municipality on possible risks for Prato. But Chinese residents in the city fear the economic effects more than the health ones: “The contagion area is very far from where the majority of the city community comes from”’; ‘The risks for Prato. The Councillor: “Limit Chinese New Year demonstrations”’; ‘Government declares a state of health emergency. Flights blocked to and from China’; ‘Coronavirus, the Local Health Agency protocol is triggered for a woman from Prato who has just returned from Rome but tested negative’; ‘Coronavirus, the Councillor: “We expect 500 returns from China”’. Lega: “More information for citizens”’; ‘Coronavirus: the protocol is triggered for a little girl hospitalized in Prato’; ‘Only one patient on the first day of the Coronavirus clinic’; ‘Local Health Agency: 230 children returning from China are at home in voluntary isolation’; ‘Coronavirus: protests for the opening of the clinic for Chinese returnees’; ‘Coronavirus: joint summit – the Councillor: situation constantly monitored’; ‘A video to explain to nursery workers what the Coronavirus is’; ‘Access control in the city and in public places have been strengthened: summit in the Prefecture’; ‘Schools, starting with the new rules and without major critical issues in the city and in the province’; ‘Chinese children are starting to return to school’; ‘Chinese students are deserting lessons en masse. The Municipality meets community associations’; ‘After the voluntary quarantine is over, Chinese students return to school’; ‘New rules in the police station to avoid gatherings outside the Foreigners Office: distancing for those in queue’; ‘Chinese students, a third still no school: new absences are feared as infections increase’.

cemented the image of a law-transgressing minority, no longer blamed for illegal conduct, but for its preferred orientation away from Italy and towards Asia: «Italy is still seen as a high-risk country», explained the representative of the Chinese religious association, who was in direct touch with many of the Chinese families in the city who decided to either take their children out of school and adopt homeschooling methods, or send them back to China directly: «There is no pandemic in China right now», the director of the community school told us, thus echoing the high-risk vs. low-risk countries categorization that is redesigning migratory routes in the post-pandemic system: «This is why they want to go back to China and have their children study there».

### *3.4 Emplaced ethnicity*

Lastly, in our focus on the production of posts relating to Chineseness as an “emplaced ethnicity” (7 posts)<sup>9</sup>, we looked at how particularly localized images of spatialized, emplaced Chineseness were emphasized in the construction of the Chineseness framing narratives. Of particular importance in understanding this discursive shift was the representation of Chineseness offered by *Notizie di Prato* in a video report posted on the newspaper’s YouTube channel on November 26, 2020<sup>10</sup>. Titled “Prato’s Chinese and COVID: a journey into *Macrolotto Zero*”, the video journalist interviews a young Chinese woman who says that many of her friends are returning to China as «there’s nothing left to do here» while in China «you can go out, you can have fun». It is significant that *Notizie di Prato* chose to underline its choice to examine Chinese responses to the virus by framing the account within the spatial boundaries of “Macrolotto Zero”, the official name of the neighborhood in Prato commonly known as Chinatown. This is an essentialist discursive practice that overdetermines the spatialized presence of Chinese migrants in a specific area: as Parbuono (2018) notes, although the Chinese population in Prato is gradually diversifying in terms of its settlement choices and many entrepreneurs are choosing to live in the outer suburbs closer to the countryside, the local spatial imageries associate Chinese migrants with Chinatown. Going back to the report on the Chinese district, the reporter dwells on the absence of Chinese people and the inactivity of most of the businesses. This invisibility is subtly strengthened by mentioning a rumor that the Chinese were secretly organizing journeys to China to get vaccinated. Our data suggest that the gradual decentering of Chinese identities from the public stage was not only due to the children’s absence in the school system; it was also read as the result of the difficult economic situation that was increasingly being experienced by many entrepreneurs. Business owners like the one we interviewed, for instance, talked about the shortage of manpower:

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<sup>9</sup> Here are the titles translated into English of the 7 articles considered: ‘The dragon parades through the streets of the city centre’; ‘Coronavirus psychosis, Chinese restaurant business plummets’; ‘First signs of difficulty for Asian entrepreneurs could lead to radical changes in the prices of areas which until recently were in high demand, such as that of Macrolotto 1’; ‘The Chinese are diversifying into sectors other than textiles’; ‘Almost half of the users of the post office are foreigners and the staff is now multilingual: the office staff includes a native Chinese speaker and one of Indian origin’; ‘Covid also brings ready-to-wear and Chinese clothing to its knees’; ‘Prato’s Chinese and COVID: A journey into Macrolotto Zero’.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShDHnUCUFCw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShDHnUCUFCw).

*«Before, I used to get 20-30 phone calls a day. Now I get 1, or 2, maybe not even that. You realize how many Chinese have gone from the lack of staff».* (The young Chinese-national restaurant owner).

Others, like the Chinese community organization representative, reported that entrepreneurs were struggling: they were forced to stop their production and could not make enough money to meet their payment deadlines:

*«Many (Chinese) want to leave because they can't pay the warehouses. They're under more and more pressure from the bailiffs, day after day because they can't pay the rent. They aren't producing anything».* (The Italian secretary of a Chinese religious association).

Invisibility is a concept that could somehow bring together the topics addressed by these two framings. Indeed, the construction of Chinese otherness is characterized by a twofold distancing: a permanent physical one (return migration to China or the decision not to move to Italy) and a symbolic one (taking children out of public schools because of the lack of trust in the “Italian way” of dealing with the virus). This tendency is typical of the multicultural relations in contemporary Prato society. Our interviewees also talked about this, sharing their sense of uncertainty, particularly when reflecting on second- and third-generation Chinese-Italians missing out on the opportunity to be exposed to public education:

*«Many (students) will come back, but we have lost some of them, sadly. I mean, those who are still of compulsory school age will surely come back next year. I'm very sad to say though, that some students, who maybe turned 18 already, and who were already struggling a bit, have lost touch with the school and won't come back [...] This year and a half made us lose so much ground. The most serious thing that has happened, and this is objective, is the fall in these kids' level of Italian proficiency: they only used to speak Italian with their schoolmates. There's online learning, that's true, but you must put yourself in these kids' shoes: maybe they're following classes from home, or even from the factory; they see the teacher on the screen but there's no interaction whatsoever».* (The Italian principal of a high school).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the plasticity of the meaning of Chineseness in the Prato context: when directly associated with the spread of the virus, the discursive practices surrounding Chineseness explicitly characterized it as an unwanted marker; even when compliant with the safety measures taken to prevent the further spread of the virus, Chinese identities were treated with diffidence and detachment. Despite the discursive change that became visible with the intensification of posts relating to the Chinese model community, the persistent shadow of orientalist otherness defined by diffidence and latent hatred was reported to loom over Sino-Italian relations. The sense of distancing and diffidence experienced by our young interviewee when performing an act of solidarity shows how the experience of the pandemic kept bringing the Chinese body and identity back to the conflictual situation that characterized the Chinese presence in the city before its moment of glory.

*«What is left on the ground and how has the experience of a year and a half of pandemic impacted on the city's cosmopolitan reality? 'It goes back and forth like waves, [...] I mean, yes, something is left, but then it's washed away by the next wave, or maybe there's something new that the waves bring to the shore. Periodically, if we check people's comments in Facebook posts, when some business run by Chinese is shut because they haven't complied with some regulation, you still get the same old: See? They weren't that obedient after all. So, yes, I would say that they're like sediments: they're here but they can be washed away. It's still such a dynamic situation, and we need to act so that what is positive*



*can remain and isn't washed away by the next wave'».* (The Italian local politician of Chinese background).

As our contribution comes to an end, we go back to the main question that inspired our analysis of the multiple meanings assigned to Chineseness during the first year of the pandemic: how can we imagine these cosmopolitan futures in the making? As one of our interviewees put it, it seems that as far as the Italian context of Prato is concerned, we are living in a moment of transformation in which anything could happen. Most importantly, this case tells us that, no matter how many different stages this transformative experience might involve, phase after phase, a new type of consciousness seems to slowly remain, with the potential to significantly change pre-existing intercultural relations.

### *Conclusion*

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to reshape intercultural relations in Prato (Italy) by accentuating the public debate over the Chinese presence in the city. This article cast light on the malleability of the concept of ethnic identities in the pandemic year by relying on the concept of mediascape and using a longitudinal analysis of social media coverage, from which four narratives emerged. In Prato, as our analysis suggests, a narrative of difference has initially relied upon a dramatization of a conflictual understanding of Italian-Chinese relationships at the beginning of 2020. Later on, a new narrative took shape, namely that of an exemplary behavior by the “Chinese community”. Towards the end of the year, when restrictive measures were gradually lifted, a new discursive distancing became evident, as the spotlight fell, once again, on the differences of two communities, the local and the “ethnic” one. The purpose of this article is twofold. First of all, following in the footsteps of a growing body of literature, it has critically explored the production of meanings on social media and its contribution to constructive debates on cosmopolitanism. Secondly, our effort paves the way to complementary research projects that could adopt the same methods in the same context or elsewhere, while filtering the analysis through a different linguistic prism.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a prime example of how local responses to global events emerged and were technologically mediated in their potential to reshape cultural relations, diasporic narratives, and identity boundaries. Hence, it is in this sense that our localized example of how the meanings assigned to the Chinese migratory reality in the Italian city of Prato using a quali-quantitative methodology adds material to the scholarship on digital transnationalism (Sun and Yu 2022), while at the same time calling for more experimental, comparative, and longitudinal studies.

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