

Chinese entrepreneurs in Italy. An asymmetric socio-economic embeddedness

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In the context of immigrant entrepreneurship, in terms of absolute numbers, entrepreneurship rates and scientific attention, the Chinese case is one of the most significant phenomena in the world and in Italy.

In early 2016, there were some 74,000 Chinese business owners and associates in Italy and some 49,000 personal firms (Unioncamere, 2016a; 2016b) while the PRC nationals residents in Italy were 271,000, and the holders of a regular permit of stay were an estimate of were 340,000: a crude entrepreneurship rate therefore over 20%.

The following analysis will look at the micro-entrepreneurial paths of the diaspora, without however adding to the considerable amount of literature that already exists on the competitive advantage of Chinese diaspora in the frame of the “ethnic economy” concept (Waldinger, Aldrich & Ward 1990). The analysis will focus instead on the mixed embeddedness aspects that characterise the economic participation of minorities and immigrants (Rath & Kloosterman 2000). Actually, the concept of embeddedness is probably the most important contribution the new economic sociology gave to the debate on the relationship between economic and society: based on the seminal work by Granovetter (1985), it implies that economic action is situated within (“embedded” in) actual social relations. “Mixed embeddedness” means that different social structures and networks, existing in the context where migration takes place, contribute to the ethnicisation of economic sectors, which can therefore be interpreted as a result of inter-group relations. In our hypothesis, localized institutions and networks play a basic role in the ethnicization of some economic sectors, thus to be seen as the consequence of intergroup relations, and disembedding and re-embedding processes (see as an interesting case study Ceccagno 2015).

Based on qualitative and quantitative evidences on intergroup links – with a focus on Chinese immigrants – drawing upon ten years of research on this issue, this paper will analyse the mixed embeddedness and networks of native and immigrant actors in selected Italian industrial districts, classifying most relevant strategies and their potential positive and negative outcomes.

Despite some work carried out on the relationship between immigration and districts (Mistri 2006; Dei Ottati 2009; Dei Ottati 2014; Milanese et al. 2016), scholars who study districts have often given self-absolving versions of the role of immigrant entrepreneurship, linking it to external factors and focusing on the disembedding aspects (Bracci, 2016). The debate on changes affecting Italian local production systems wonders if there is a transformation or just a decline (Solinas 2006). The evolution of the international and local contexts includes export, outsourcing of most labour-intensive production activities, buyout of district firms, and the growing role of immigrant labour. Though, the historic role that immigration has played in Italian local production systems have been underestimated.

The individual ethnic specialisations that are found in them are part of a more general system of inter-group relations, that meets commercialisation and informalisation of districts in the global economic restructuring process (Panayiotopoulos 2010). Therefore, despite the obvious Chinese specificity as for entrepreneurship rates, this presence is just part of the overall evolution of the district model.

In order to analyse Chinese entrepreneurship and its relationship with local production systems, we shall start by mapping the Chinese presence (§ 2) to show the centrality of the districts. We shall then describe the link between location and entrepreneurial presence (§ 3), and try to identify interactions between migratory paths, the local communities and markets (§ 4), that explain them, attempting also to determine what developments can be foreseen (§ 5).

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