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**SCAMMED: DISSECTING CYBER SLAVERY
IN SOUTH EAST ASIA**

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CHINESE ESPRESSO

Contested Race & Convivial
Space in Contemporary Italy

GRAZIA TING DENG

Chinese Espresso: A Conversation with Grazia Ting Deng

Devi SACCHETTO,
Grazia Ting DENG

In *Chinese Espresso: Contested Race and Convivial Space in Contemporary Italy* (Princeton University Press, 2024), Grazia Ting Deng analyses one of the most characteristic Italian places: the coffee bar. Drawing from long-term ethnographic research, including some months of work as an informal and unpaid apprentice barista in a Chinese-managed bar, she leads readers inside the construction of different cultural practices in these spaces of social relations. In fact, a bar in Italy is not only a place to consume drinks and food but also a place of cultural practice in everyday life, particularly for men. Italians often associate the coffee bar and in particular caffè espresso with Italian culture. Challenging the idea of espresso as ‘authentic’ Italian culture, Deng stresses how the concept of ‘culture’ is one of the ways through which Italians produce racialisation. Through a vibrant narrative, she highlights the fact that bars are a crucial terrain not only to shape racialisation processes but also to transform racial hierarchies.

Devi Sacchetto: To write this book, you spent several years in Italy. Could you tell us a bit about your experience as a young Chinese woman there?

Grazia Deng: This book is primarily based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Bologna from May 2014 to July 2015 and short annual visits afterwards. My multiple identifications—including gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and age, among others—intersected with one another to shape my fieldwork experience. My Chinese appearance announced my ‘difference’ from both the biology and the culture of Italians, even though I spoke fluent Italian. Like many other Chinese immigrants in the country, I personally experienced various forms of institutional discrimination and everyday racism, including when applying for residence permits, racist ticket inspection on buses and trains, and verbal abuse and harassment based on my Chinese appearance. As a woman, I encountered the ‘male gaze’ and ‘patriarchal gaze’ that came not only from native Italian men, but also from Chinese men as well as other male immigrants from varied national backgrounds.

That said, my identity as a young Chinese woman fluent in Italian benefited my fieldwork. I was an ideal barista in the eyes of many Chinese coffee bar owners as well as their customers. I thus was able to serve as an informal apprentice barista, which was, however, accompanied by gendered harassment—typical for any woman serving in that role in Italy. I was also able to find two Italian families who were willing to host

me successively. The homestay experience allowed me to obtain firsthand experience of native Italians' family life as well as their social and cultural activities. The hospitality that I received nevertheless sometimes stemmed from an Orientalist fascination with my difference.

None of the putatively disempowering factors in my life—racial and ethnic identity, gender, and age—proved a barrier to my ethnographic knowledge production. Both structural inequality and empowering ethnographic moments, deliberately designed or not, have shaped my embodied experiences in the 'field' and constitute key components of how I go about producing ethnographic knowledge.

DS: Chinese-managed coffee bars are places where a sense of community and solidarity is constructed among Italians, Chinese, and other migrants through the sharing of food and drink. However, as you show in your book, they are also spaces of tension, where processes of racialisation can occur. Chinese, as other people, develop knowledge about racial differences and hierarchies in their everyday lives. You highlight how Chinese bartenders are subject to racialisation as well as how they reproduce racialisation. Since you conducted long-term ethnography and came back to Italy throughout the years, do you think the feelings of Italians toward migrants, and particularly Chinese, are changing?

GD: I cannot generalise the feelings of all Italians. I know Italians who are pro-immigration leftists; I also know Italians who are anti-immigration populists. Italians from different social backgrounds might have very different feelings towards Chinese and other foreign migrants.

That said, it is safe to say that, as you mentioned earlier, the concept of culture plays a central role in producing immigrant racialisation in Italy's public discourses, in which culture, nation, and race are conflated. The discourses of cultural differences between Italians and immigrants are widespread. They function to legitimate and justify perceptions of recent immigrants as more backward and less civilised. They serve to explain social inequalities as the result of biological differences rather than structural inequalities. This form of racism provides an ideological device that neatly harmonises with current populist discourses and alarmist rhetoric that warn of the dangers inherent in the erosion of national and cultural boundaries by foreign migrants. Foreign migrants are further labelled, grouped, and differentially categorised based on fixed stereotypes. Some are more integrated and some more trustworthy, others more dangerous, and others again more hardworking.

The racialisation of Chinese residents has its own peculiar features. I did hear native Italians describe Chinese workers and entrepreneurs as friendly, smiling, and hardworking. Yet, the same Italians may also believe that the mysterious 'Chinese mafia' is the mastermind behind the prosperity of Chinese business ventures in Italy through unfair competition and underground tricks, thereby destroying local economies. As an

Italian anthropologist friend of mine sarcastically commented: 'One Chinese is exotic; many Chinese are immigrants.' But no matter whether one or many, no matter their citizenship, and no matter how attached they might be to Italy, the racialised Chinese are 'matter out of place', to use anthropologist Mary Douglas's phrase. The Italian Orientalist gaze perceives China as culturally formidable, economically ambitious, and geopolitically threatening, and people of Chinese descent as unassimilable.

Over the past four decades, Chinese residents have become one of the most prosperous and economically powerful ethnic and immigrant groups in Italy. The increasing number of 'Oriental' faces as well as their products and their storefront enterprises are so visible as to constitute an integral part of the urban landscape and urban life. The seemingly mysterious economic boom of Chinese immigrants in tandem with China's rise as a global economic power look like a counter current to Italy's chronic economic stagnation. In Italy's populist-nationalist discourse, the 'China threat' has now taken on a new guise that merges admiration and resentment.

DS: Chinese nationals began filling this business niche in the early 2000s and, from the start, Italians who sold their businesses to Chinese nationals were often described by local people as traitors to their country. The entry of the Chinese into the coffee bar sector in Italy occurred at a time of profound transformation of these social spaces. Since the late 1990s, many bars have changed into business spaces or, as they are usually called, 'trendy bars'. Because of their poor professional skills and existing racism, Chinese investors, instead of taking part in this upscaling process, largely clustered in less profitable businesses often located on the periphery of cities. Running these 'traditional' businesses, which are deeply embedded in local communities, always required a lot of social skills. From this point of view, do you think Chinese bars maintain a space for sociability in which, to some extent, racism is countered and solidarity is achieved by sharing the common experience of discrimination?

GD: Chinese entrepreneurs usually purchase an existing coffee bar rather than opening a new one, at least for their first coffee bar business. And very often it was a business located on the periphery of the cities. One of the reasons was that, in that way, they could take over the entire package of the business including the existing clientele. Such peripheral bars are usually embedded in neighbourhood life, frequented by regular customers who live or work in the area and form a specific coffee bar community. The patrons of these coffee bars are primarily marginalised people, including working-class men of different generations who often have a migrant background from within Italy or beyond the national borders. Therefore, diverse racial and ethnic groups converge, meet, and interact with one another in these convivial establishments.

In these social spaces, I saw emotion, friendship, care, and ultimately, a kind of social solidarity that went beyond the transactional nature of business exchange. I observed more intimate and reciprocal relationships of trust as well as a sense of community being constructed and reinforced between Chinese baristas and their patrons. These people were no longer strangers, but valued acquaintances, neighbours, and even friends. In their everyday interpersonal interactions, ethnicity and national identity retreated to a less critical position. Some Chinese families and their patrons, especially lonely elderly customers who did not have close kin living with them, had also constructed a kind of fictive kinship. In the case of foreign customers, I saw sympathy and discursive interracial solidarity that was often achieved by sharing experiences of discrimination.

All that said, I do not want to romanticise such conviviality and solidarity. These Chinese-managed coffee bars were a contact zone where power dynamics are highly asymmetrical. Chinese baristas also sought to police the kinds of people who became customers and thereby maintain the sociality of the space they managed, conforming to 'good' customers' moral expectations, while excluding 'bad' customers who risked destroying such sociality. From their understanding, 'good' customers were usually white Italians and 'bad' customers were foreign migrants. The policing of customers thus provided a context for tension and conflict. During my fieldwork, I never personally witnessed physical fights in any coffee bar that I regularly visited, but I heard about several cases of disputes with customers that ended in physical confrontations.

Meanwhile, most Chinese baristas were aware that foreign migrants were one of the main sources of patronage for their business. For this reason, they tried to see them not as homogeneous. Their willingness to negotiate, however, did not take them beyond either Italian moral norms for a respectful citizen or the Chinese moral criterion that was based on their understanding of civility and modernity. Thus, Chinese baristas' construction of a convivial social space is a dynamic process that runs in tandem with their own racial formations.

DS: You stress that when a Chinese owner purchases a bar, he or she also inherits the established community who spend time at the bar. This group can actively participate in the reproduction of the taste to which they are accustomed by transmitting local knowledge to the new Chinese bartenders. However, you stress that the space of social relations stops outside the bar. Could you explain why these social relations do not extend beyond the boundaries of the bar?

GD: Like other interactive service workers, baristas provide good service through performing emotional labour. They need to engage in emotional and bodily performances to construct and maintain good relationships with their customers. I mentioned earlier that a Chinese woman working as a barista would be hard-pressed to avoid unwanted flirting and harassment in everyday coffee bar management. The social reality of Italy's more liberal sexual mores and pluralistic family structures that Chinese baristas have

learned about from their customers seem to have confirmed their negative stereotypes of native Italians' callousness regarding marriage and family. They contrast this with the traditional value of family integrity espoused by recent Chinese immigrants, who see this also as a prerequisite for upholding a family business and its economic prosperity.

Most Chinese-managed coffee bars were also class-bound social spaces. Understandably, Chinese baristas readily generalised their perceptions of the specific social class who patronised their bar as representative of all Italians as a racial group, since, in many cases, their Italian customers were among the few native Italians with whom they interact daily. Poor manners, excessive consumption of alcohol, addiction to gambling, and other perceived misbehaviours all run counter, in one way or another, to Chinese baristas' family values, work ethics, and their perceptions of modernity. Excessive consumption of alcohol and addiction to gambling—two fundamental sources of income for many Chinese-managed coffee bars—somewhat ironically become evidence allowing Chinese baristas, especially those who are Christian, to judge their customers as morally defective.

Coffee bar management has therefore reshaped Chinese baristas' racialised perceptions of native Italians. These perceptions constitute their new localised racial formations of whiteness in sharp contrast with 'us' Chinese, and this in turn draws new racial boundaries and intensifies ethnic divisions. Several Chinese baristas with whom I talked shared their earlier positive expectations and imaginary of a developed Europe populated exclusively by respectable white Westerners. They gave up all such illusions once they became involved in the coffee bar business. A civilised, developed, and affluent Western country with only well-educated and respectable white Westerners turned out to be an Occidental fantasy.

Moreover, all my Chinese interlocutors felt a strong sense of otherness in Italy. The prejudice, racialisation, and social exclusion that Chinese residents encounter and perceive in one form or another remain a lived experience shared by both first-generation Chinese immigrants and their children. Such perceptions of otherness were also happening in their everyday interactions within the coffee bar space. These tensions and conflicts solidified Chinese baristas' ethnic consciousness and worked to justify social and ethnic boundaries.

In these contexts, the conviviality that Chinese baristas strive to construct tends to be both spatialised and contingent. It usually stopped when they stepped out of their business space. When Chinese owners sell their business and move out of the neighbourhood, their site-specific personal relationships with their customers terminate.

DS: You describe very well the issue of sociability and how it can produce various phenomena, considering that bartenders are 'Oriental' migrants. However, it seems that much of what you write about the need for Chinese bartenders to learn social relations applies to all bars in Italy, not only to the Chinese-run ones. What sets Chinese bartenders apart from Italians or other migrants managing bars in the country?

GD: Yes, the social skills that Chinese baristas learn are exactly those needed for managing a bar in Italy. This is the point. Though acting as business owners, Chinese baristas are perceived as cultural outsiders who possess little to no cultural legitimacy in this setting. Instead their native Italian customers are the ones who have the power to determine the cultural legitimacy of the place, in terms of both the taste of coffee and the service. Chinese baristas thus strive to learn and convey their sociability and hospitality to conform to the sociality of the existing bar that they take over and to fit into the social norms of Italian society at large.

Yet, social interactions are never gender, class, racially, or ethnically neutral. All their positionalities intersect with one another to form a social relationship of power in which their sociability is performed and experienced. What impressed me most was how Chinese baristas strategically deployed cultural essentialism, stereotypes, and misunderstandings, as well as various forms of structural inequality, all the while attempting to convey hospitality in the quest for a convivial space. On the one hand, they were aware of their Chinese appearance as an inherent defect in their business management, so they often believed they had to provide better service than their Italian counterparts. For instance, all the Chinese baristas whom I met could make one or more latte art designs, although they were also aware that the decoration of a cappuccino was not a widespread practice in Italy's coffee bars. Sometimes, they would hire white baristas to submerge the Chinese ownership of a quintessentially Italian social space that they manage. On the other hand, Chineseness itself could also become an effective strategy in dealing with certain social situations. For example, Chinese identity, along with their supposed lack of linguistic skills, provided a good excuse and a strategy for Chinese female baristas to use to refuse unwanted communication and to dodge awkward and embarrassing harassment.

In this sense, Chinese baristas not only sought to learn social skills needed for all bars, they also learned to manipulate certain apparent differences and disadvantages strategically in their favour. A convivial, heterogeneous social space is thus produced through such 'frictions', to use anthropologist Anna Tsing's concept.

DS: In your book, you use the concept of bricolage to acknowledge migrants' agency in tackling constraints and limitations. It seems that this bricolage 'in the making' takes a transnational form, as the social relations are changing based, for example, on Italy's economic stagnation in contrast to the rise of China. Do you think the growth of China as a superpower can change the day-to-day social relations in the Italian bars managed by Chinese people?

GD: I use the concept of 'convivial bricolage' to refer to an interdependent and collaborative social practice by which Chinese migrants cultivate urban conviviality. This bricolage 'in the making' is produced in Chinese baristas' everyday social, cultural, and racial encounters in both local and transnational contexts. As I mentioned earlier,

the coffee bar space was a kind of prism through which Chinese baristas acquired racial knowledge and produced a racialised world view. Their racialisation of both native Italians and foreign migrants reflects their double disenchantment with Italy, as well as the insecurity of their lives in this host country. On the one hand, they are disillusioned with Italy's pluralistic society and structural inequalities in terms of race, ethnicity, and class. They have come to associate Italy's racial and ethnic heterogeneity with crime and public peril. As for the native Italians, on the other hand, their laziness, sloppiness, and other perceived negative qualities simply do not match what, in the Chinese imaginary, white people from a 'developed country' should be like.

Italy's economic stagnation is another issue, especially as it stands in such sharp contrast to China's meteoric rise. Many Chinese with whom I talked even questioned their decision to emigrate to this supposedly affluent and developed Western country. They commonly believed that Italians' problematic work ethics and other perceived negative qualities were the real reasons for Italy's economic stagnation, in contrast to the success of both the Chinese in Italy and China in the world. Against this backdrop of shifting geopolitics, Chinese people in Italy questioned the Western-dominated racial hierarchy and formed their own racial understandings. These new racial formations are symptomatic of China's ongoing wider challenge to the established global hierarchy. Moreover, Chinese baristas and many other Chinese entrepreneurs in Italy have been disappointed that their increasing economic prosperity has not translated into social respectability but, ironically, resulted in even more insecurity and exposure to crime. This predicament of being simultaneously economically privileged and socially vulnerable further fuelled Chinese baristas' ethnic consciousness, while establishing boundaries to the conviviality that they cultivate. ●