



**LIU
XIAODONG**
MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

**Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina**

**22 aprile/April
19 giugno/June
2016**

INDEX

1) *Press release*

2) *Fact Sheet*

3) *Photo Sheet*

4) *Exhibition Walkthrough*

A CLOSER LOOK

Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi Director General Arturo Galansino catalogue introduction

A Picture of Migrations by Liu Xiaodong

Snapshot brushstrokes by Francesco Bonami

Dreams of Economic Glory: the crossed destinies of Prato e Wenzhou by Giorgio Bernardini

5) *List of the works*



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PRESS RELEASE

LIU XIAODONG: MIGRATIONS

Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, Strozzina 22 April–19 June 2016

Starting 22 April 2016, the Strozzina area of Palazzo Strozzi in Florence will be hosting a major one-man show devoted to the work of **Liu Xiaodong**, one of China's most important and original contemporary artists.

The exhibition **LIU XIAODONG: MIGRATIONS**, devised and produced by the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, will be showcasing a broad selection of 182 **between drawings and photographs 10 paintings** and one **video-documentary** on which the artist will be working during **a spell in Tuscany lasting from the autumn of 2015 through to the spring of 2016**. The main themes of the work on display will be the cities of Florence and Prato and the Sienese countryside, which the artist is observing and experiencing through direct contact with the local people, but with a special focus on the local Chinese communities.

Liu Xiaodong, who was born in Liaoning province in 1963 and trained in Beijing, is celebrated for his **very personal painterly style midway between historical painting and a reporter's angle on the contemporary world**. Seemingly routine moments or daily events take on an epic monumentality in Liu's large canvases, akin to stills recording places in the world marked by conflict or by social and human tension. With their style which, while summary and extremely controlled, is at the same time emotional and heavy with texture, Liu's pictures reproduce images of everyday life, almost always in the open air, inhabited by the men and women who populate the countryside or the cities in which the painter has chosen to spend time. A crucial role in his creative process is played by **photography**, which he uses as a tool of observation and a model for his painting, but also as an *objet d'art* in its own right for display alongside his paintings and preparatory sketches, testifying to his urgency to forge a link between different artistic techniques and cultural realities.

The original idea behind Palazzo Strozzi's project was sparked by the artist's special interest in the Chinese community in Prato, the largest such community in Italy and one of the most important in Europe, which is now in its third generation. But in addition to other sites around Florence which host large Chinese communities, such as San Donnino and Osmannoro, the artist also addresses the classic Tuscan countryside, the hills of the Florentine and Sienese Chianti districts. Taking his inspiration from these areas, he has decided to produce a number of paintings depicting the "dreamlike" "picture postcard" landscape of the Val d'Orcia and the Crete Senesi. The exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi also provides an opportunity for a reflection on the **migration of peoples** and the ways in which they interact with their new physical, geographical and cultural environments, including in connection with recent critical events on Europe's borders – events which Liu has witnessed in the first person in Bodrum in Turkey, and in Kos in Greece.

The project will be completed by the publication of a catalogue devoted to the artist and by a broad programme of activities designed to tie in with the exhibition including conferences, workshops and lectures exploring the exhibition's themes in greater depth in Florence and other venues in Tuscany.

Liu Xiaodong was born in the district of Liaoning in 1963, and now lives and works in Beijing. His solo exhibitions include: *Painting as Shooting*, Fondazione Cini, Venice (2015); *Liu Xiaodong: Hometown Boy*, UCCA, Beijing (2010); *Art In Motion*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai (2006). He has also taken part in group shows among which: *Host and Guest*, Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv (2013); *Contemporary Art From China and Belgium*, National Art Museum of China, Beijing (2010); *Collision*, CAFA Art Museum, Beijing (2009); *The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art*, Museum of Chicago Art Institute, Chicago (2009); *China 21Century*, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome (2008). Liu Xiaodong has participated in the 10th edition of the Gwangju Biennale, in Gwangju and in the Venice Biennale, in Venice in 1997 and in 2013.

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FACT SHEET

Titolo:	<i>Liu Xiaodong: Migrations</i>
Site:	Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, Strozzina
Date:	22 april – 19 june 2016
Curated by:	Arturo Galansino
Promoted and organised by:	Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi
With the collaboration of:	Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong
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Opening hours:	Daily 12.00-20.00; Thursday 12.00-23.00
Admission:	Full price € 5,00; € 4,00 concessions; € 3,00 Schools; Free entrance on Thursday 18.00-23.00.
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MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina

22 aprile/April
19 giugno/June
2016

PHOTO SHEET

The high resolution images are to be requested to the press office

PAINTINGS

1	LIU XIAODONG, Chinatown, 2015, oil on canvas, 200 x 180 cm, Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/London/Hong Kong	
1a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketch of street scene in Prato</i> . 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
2	LIU XIAODONG, Chinatown 2, 2015, oil on canvas 180 x 200 cm, Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/London/Hong Kong	
3	LIU XIAODONG, Chinatown 3, 2015, oil on canvas, 180 x 200 cm, Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/London/Hong Kong	
4	LIU XIAODONG, Refugees 1 (Rifugiati 1), 2015, oil on canvas, 200 x 180 cm, Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/London/Hong Kong	
5	LIU XIAODONG, Refugees 2, 2015, oil on canvas, 180 x 200 cm, Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/London/Hong Kong	
6	LIU XIAODONG, Refugees 3, 2015, oil on canvas, 180 x 200 cm, Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/London/Hong Kong	
7	LIU XIAODONG, Refugees 4, 2015, olio su tela, 220 x 300 cm, Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/London/Hong Kong	



LIU XIAODONG

MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina

22 aprile/April
19 giugno/June
2016

PHOTOPAINTINGS-SKETCHES

1	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
1a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketch of refugees in Kos</i> . 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
13	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
13a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketched Portrait from Kos</i> . 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
13b	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketched Portrait from Kos II</i> . 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
14	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
16	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	

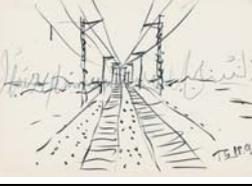


LIU XIAODONG

MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina

22 aprile/April
19 giugno/June
2016

20	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
20a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketched map of refugee trail to Europe 2015-2016.</i> Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
82	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
82a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketch of railway line between Budapest and Vienna.</i> 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
85	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
85a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketch of sign on Austra-Hungary border saying the border is closed.</i> 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
85b	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketch from Austria-Hungary border.</i> 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
96	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	



LIU XIAODONG

MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina

22 aprile/April
19 giugno/June
2016

96a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketch from Akyralar, Turkey _I'm so sorry, I couldn_t find you.</i> 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
131	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
135	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
145	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
145a	LIU XIAODONG, <i>Sketch of landscape from Chiusure.</i> 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio	
167	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
170	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	
171	LIU XIAODONG, Photopainting. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong Studio	



LIU XIAODONG

MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina

22 aprile / April
19 giugno / June
2016

EXHIBITION WALKTHROUGH

The art of Liu Xiaodong (born in Liaoning, People's Republic of China, in 1963) is invariably the product of direct interaction with a place and with the people who live in it or pass through it, and it equally invariably takes the shape of a documentary probe consisting not only in the painted image but also in written notes, drawings, photographs, videos and images taken with his mobile phone.

This exhibition is based, on the one hand, on the artist's experience of the Chinese communities living in Tuscany, and on the other, on a trip taking in several cities in Europe on which set out in November 2015 and wound up with the exhibition's inauguration. Thus the exhibition may be seen as a kind of illustrated diary of a journey which began in Florence and Prato, took in Europe's furthest eastern boundaries from the Akyarlar peninsula in southern Turkey to the Island of Kos in Greece, continued on the train linking the Hungarian border to the Austrian, and finally reached the central train station in Vienna.

The *Chinatown* cycle, characterizes the **First Room** and it is devoted to people and places seen and experienced during Liu's time in Prato. His work here points up his measured, controlled style of painting immersed in reality and capable of slowing down the observer's vision, focusing attention on subjects which might appear at first sight to be of only secondary importance, for instance the empty interior of a yarn factory in *Chinatown 2*. *Chinatown 1* and *Chinatown 3*, based on the artist's photographic exploration of the Macrolotto Zero, the neighbourhood in which most of Prato's Chinese migrants congregated in the 1980s and '90s, portray ordinary events in the everyday lives of these people captured in all their dignity and normality as they saunter down the street or chat in groups.

The *Refugees cycle*, on the other hand, is devoted to today's migrants, to the migrants of the 2010s, who, unlike the Chinese migrants in Prato, are fleeing to Europe from their countries of origin for social, humanitarian and political reasons. Adopting a style that quite literally emulates photography, *Refugees 1* depicts the crowded train station of Vienna as a point of arrival, transit and hope for people who still have no name or identity. *Refugees 2* focuses instead on the railway track marking the border between the Austrian capital and Budapest. The image offers a strong perspective view of an empty track devoid of human figures and opening out onto the horizon, metaphorically symbolising a "non-place", a point of transition between a familiar lifestyle and another way of life as yet totally unknown and uncertain.

The **Second Room** is dedicated to *Migrations 2016* (Video, sound, 17' regia / directed by Yang Bo, suono / sound by Shi Qian.) the video documentary about the journey of Liu Xiaodong from Tuscany to the eastern borders of Europe. "Afterward Prato, Liu Xiaodong says "I also went to try and follow the path Syrian refugees were taking to enter into Europe at that point. From the Akyarlar Peninsula in Southern Turkey, to the island of Kos, and then to the train tracks running between the Hungarian and Austrian borders, leading all the way to the central train station in Vienna. Along the way, apart from Syrian refugees there were also many Afghans, Pakistanis, Iranis and Africans."

The **Third Room** hosts a documentary reportage designed to accompany Liu Xiaodong's work with an account of the unique social and historical identity of the Chinese migrant community in Prato. The section is curated by Giorgio Bernardini who lives and works in Prato. Bernardini tells the story of the community's daily life with the sensitivity of a reporter and journalist who holds a degree in sociology. The three major issues addressed, and ideally split among the room's three walls, are: identity and the sense of belonging; conflict; and the crossed destinies of the two cities of Prato and Wenzhou, the area from which most of the Chinese living in Prato originally hailed.

Many of the artworks on display, in the **Fourth Room**, were created by the artist in his workshop in Beijing on the basis of photographs and sketches that he made during his tour of Europe in the autumn of 2015. The three large paintings in this room, on the other hand, were painted from life, in direct, ongoing contact with the subjects portrayed: a group of migrants from Syria and Afghanistan landing in Kos (*Refugees 4*); a Chinese family captured during a break from work in a factory in Prato (*Chinatown 4*); and a landscape depicting the countryside around Siena (*Europa Europa*). The latter picture, painted only about two weeks before the exhibition opened, marks a clear change of style and subject matter compared to his *Chinatown* and *Refugees* cycles. Yet at the same time it acts as a kind of link between the two, offering an idealised



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MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

**Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina**

**22 aprile/April
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2016**

image of Tuscany – an international tourist destination, but also a symbol of the European continent as a promised land for migrants. As Liu himself wrote: "Yearning for a better place, a better life, is an intrinsic part of man's nature. Migrations are bursting with hope and energy yet at the same time they are weighed down by anxiety and loss".

The urgent, solidary and participatory nature of Liu Xiaodong's art is also reflected, in the last two rooms of the show the **Fifth and Sixth Room**, with his documentary projects which encompass the most important moments in his travels and research, moments that are in many ways imbued with a sociological and anthropological value. Speaking in 2008, Liu said that "*society and art should be like breathing: one breathes in, the other breathes out.*" Each photograph, akin to a genuine photo painting, possesses its own artistic and creative uniqueness because the artist intervenes on each image with sketches or notes to highlight certain viewpoints or certain aspects, often emphasising a detail through a painted frame that occasionally becomes the subject of one of his canvases. Liu Xiaodong seems to work with the eyes and the storyboard technique one might expect of a film director. His works conceal ideas jotted down in a diary, a drawing or a photograph which he then transforms into a painting.



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MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina

22 aprile/April
19 giugno/June
2016

A CLOSER LOOK

Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi Director General Arturo Galansino catalogue introduction

Liu Xiaodong's art projects are a result of the personal rapport he has with places and with the people who inhabit them – places with which he forges a relationship through a process of documentary exploration comprising not only the painted image but also written notes, drawings, sketches, photographs, videos and images taken with his mobile phone. His painting is a product of the sum of this research triggered by his observation of reality, and the power of his painterly vocabulary lies precisely in this interaction "from life" and in his ability to slow our vision down, focusing our attention on what appear at first sight to be perfectly ordinary subjects.

The idea of an exhibition of Liu Xiaodong's work in the Palazzo Strozzi's Strozzina undercroft, organised in conjunction with the Massimo De Carlo gallery, took its cue from the contextualisation of the artist's work and his interest in neighbouring Prato, with its strong contradictions caused by the presence of a large Chinese community for roughly the past thirty years. The artist's approach to reality, the subject of his painting, consists precisely in seeking out imperfection and contrast: "What I'm interested in are imperfect things filled with contradictions", he said in an interview published in the catalogue of the Hometown Boy exhibition at the UCCA in Beijing (2010).

Prato, a seat of strong contrasts, on the one hand and the explosive beauty of the Tuscan countryside on the other provided the artist with his two standpoints for observing reality. Having fallen in love with the village of Chiusure, situated between the Crete Senesi and the Val d'Orcia where he had spent some time studying and working in the past, Liu Xiaodong was eager to depict it in the exhibition as the ideal place, the "stuff of dreams", a picture postcard image of the Tuscany that tourists flock to see from all over the world, pitting it against the Tuscany of Prato's factories, the "stuff of dreams" for the citizens of Wenzhou in their quest for prosperity.

The tale that the painter has woven for Palazzo Strozzi, however, starts with Prato and the dreamlike image of Tuscany but it then stretches out to the borders of Europe, to the areas currently flooded with migrants seeking a better life. In fact the Migrants project was devised by moving out in conceptual terms from places familiar to us, to develop a far broader take on the crisis that is affecting the whole of Europe ever more seriously and ever more urgently.

Liu Xiaodong's cycle of paintings entitled Refugees is devoted to today's migrants, the migrants of the 2010s who are fleeing for social, humanitarian and political reasons, unlike Wenzhou's Chinese who came to Prato in the 1980s and 1990s for economic reasons. The subjects in his paintings are people from Syria, from the Middle East and North Africa whom he met on his journey from Vienna to Bodrum in Turkey and to Kos in Greece and who shared a few moments of their life with him.

His Chinatown cycle, on the other hand, is devoted to people and places seen and experienced during his time in Prato, the interior of a textile workshop or aspects of daily life and leisure captured during his exploration of the Macrolotto Zero, the neighbourhood in which most of Prato's Chinese residents live. Liu Xiaodong is not interested here in recounting only cultural and social clashes, he also wants to tell us about the everyday lives and habits of a social group with an important history behind it, actors in a unique story in Italian and European history as we learn from sociologist and journalist Giorgio Bernardini in the essay that he has written for this catalogue and in the room in the exhibition which he has curated and devoted specifically to this theme.

Liu Xiaodong's painterly style in all of his work is invariably controlled and aware, immersed in the reality that he is endeavouring to record. Like a latter-day Macchiaiolo, as Francesco Bonami writes in the catalogue, Liu Xiaodong appears to shun any personal emotional or expressive involvement, clinging instead to the objective nature of his image filtered through an initial approach wrought by the camera or the video camera. The painter, who once wanted to be a film director, presents his paintings here in the company of a documentary film produced by Yang Bo, the director of the Shengshizeyu Advertising Company based in Beijing.

In wishing to show and to describe the "truth", Liu Xiaodong prompts the observer to dwell on his own rapport with images, on reality and consequently on the mental and emotional processes that kick in at various moments, experiences and episodes in history and in our own life story. Liu Xiaodong's art prompts us to reflect on our own way of seeing, grasping and experiencing reality. It prompts us to look at ourselves from the outside and to explore our true nature: to find out who we really are.



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A Picture of Migrations

By Liu Xiaodong, (24th March 2016)

Last September I was invited by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi to go to Prato. A part of the city has already become almost fully populated by Chinese, with already two or three generations of Chinese living and procreating here. The leather good and clothing that they make in their factories here has spread all over the world.

Afterward Prato, I also went to try and follow the path Syrian refugees were taking to enter into Europe at that point. From the Akyarlar Peninsula in Southern Turkey, to the island of Kos, and then to the train tracks running between the Hungarian and Austrian borders, leading all the way to the central train station in Vienna. Along the way, apart from Syrian refugees there were also many Afghans, Pakistanis, Iranis and Africans.

Migration has always been and will always be an unavoidable fact of humankind from the most distant past through to the future. The wish to find a better place, a more perfect life is inherently human. Migrations come filled with hope and vitality and burdened by troubles and loss.

I think that the problem and anxiety faced by Europe is that it must find a way to both maintain the traditions of its society, while also dealing with the problems that arise with so many peoples of so many cultures living side-by-side together in Europe. It is similar to my own curiosity and apprehension towards change, when I know it might be good, but at the same time I'm afraid that this change will assault the ways of my old life.

My parents grow old and die, my daughter grows up and will face all sorts of troubles and dangers. I am very anxious. My only choice is to paint them. Paint what I see.

But in a society in flux, there isn't only one single solution, not only one answer to resolve this anxiety. Europe and I are both stuck with our anxieties.



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MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
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2016

Snapshot brushstrokes

By Francesco Bonami

The phenomenon of Chinese immigration to Tuscany in the last four decades will have an impact not only on the economic, productive, and social pattern of the region but will also affect the environment visually. The movement of the new racial and cultural group will disrupt an equilibrium that has been maintained since the mid-nineteenth century. A period when an utterly local but effective artistic movement took over the cultural scene in Tuscany, one of the most liberal regions in Italy before the unification of the country. The impact that the Macchiaioli movement had on the artistic development of art in Tuscany has shaped the transformation or the lack of transformation of the modern and contemporary artistic language in a context that was rooted in a visually rich but limited domestic dimension. Liuxiadong's project for this exhibition—but in general all of his approach to the practice of painting—is very similar to that of the Macchiaioli painters, whose observation of reality tried to exclude or keep under control any possible individual emotion, maintaining a sort of theatrical distance which allowed the artists to represent the surrounding and its subjects with no risk of psychologically sympathising with them. The Macchiaioli and Liuxiadong practice what we might call a form of empathic painting which embraces the subject without sharing its identity or partaking of its issues. At the same time it would not be fair to say that the Macchiaioli or Liuxiadong are simply documenting what is in front or around them. They do interpret what they see, but more in a way that is tied to their style than to their expressions. They express the point of view of a viewer who is trying to understand but without explaining what the observer is watching. Like the Macchiaioli, Liuxiadong does not question the context; he simply immerses himself in it. The Chinese society he found in Prato and Florence is not alien to him. In a painting that seems to represent an artist's studio or perhaps simply some Chinese textile workshop, we can clearly see Liuxiadong's approach to the project—inserting worlds within worlds, overlapping or creating a parallel reality with its representation. And this is what the Chinese community has been doing since its arrival in Tuscany. They do not try to substitute existing society; they try to create a parallel one. They represent a cultural group through business as the Macchiaioli did through art. Both are and were focused on reality and not metaphors. The artist whom Liuxiadong's practice seems to mirror most is Telemaco Signorini's later period, when his paintings turned from some kind of rough Impressionism into a precursor of photo-based painting. In Signorini the old, more than classical or ancient, surrounding are the stage for contemporary society. Liuxiadong's Florence's paintings work very similarly. In Signorini's emptiness of La Piazza di Settignano all'ombra (1881–1889) it would not be surprising or shocking to see a group of Liuxiadong's Chinese characters appear from around the corner. What changes is the shops' name and hence its commercial activities, but the mood of the paintings is almost identical, like the slight roughness of the painting style itself. Let's look at Signorini's Contrada a Settignano (Antica fabbrica di pane e paste (circa 1882), Via del fuoco. Vecchio Mercato di Firenze (circa 1881), Strada a Settignano (circa 1885–1887—Liuxiadong could have simply translated these into another time. In a sort of back-to-the-future way of thinking, we have the same atmospheres where only the social players have changed. It is like a play performed in different countries by different actors but with the same stage setting. We have the same meaning, but staged in a different language, and in this case also by a different anthropological and cultural group. It is unlikely that Liuxiadong has any familiarity with the school of the Macchiaioli or more specifically with Signorini's art. What is most probable is that the coincidence of style and moods is due to the recurrence of a similar economic and social transformation in both late-nineteenth-century Tuscany and today's China. The growth of a substantial number of family-run businesses and the arrival of migrant workers at first rejected by the local social structure but subsequently, albeit not without great resistance, accepted as an essential part of the productive force needed by an ever-changing and developing economy in desperate need of external forces to remain competitive on the goods market. Liuxiadong's painting does not, like Signorini's, indulge in any emotional attitude or any irrelevant expressionism. It sticks to the facts of reality that appear in front of the artist's canvas and gaze. Both artists do not need or wish to prove their painterly skills to the viewers, just as a reporter does not need to highlight his or her writing style, luring the reader into a pseudo literature. Describing the world is enough of a contribution to its understanding. Liuxiadong's Florence project also has astonishing similarities not only with the visual artistic culture of late nineteenth-century Florence and Tuscany but also with the Italian literary movement of the time, Verismo, whose most famous representatives were Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana. Their novels, transposed to today's Florence or Prato, could be illustrated by Liuxiadong's art. A more local poet could also find his way into Liuxiadong's language—Renato Fucini. His style was humorous and synthetic, focused on the basic matter of life and reality. “Acqua passata. Storielle e aneddoti della mia vita” (literally “Water under the bridge. Little stories and anecdotes about



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my life”), a late poem from 1921, is one of his best works and makes me think of Liuxiadong’s work. Now, Liuxiadong does not paint small stories or anecdotes in the same way Fucini was doing. His images have a deeper and more committed political and social meaning, aiming to comprehend the element of change in our global world where the individual and personal destiny has some time to be immolated in the name of some kind of collective “good.” Yet, like Fucini, Liuxiadong uses little stories and individual, apparently meaningless, anecdotes to communicate a much broader view. The basic essence of reality and his scenes reflect the deep contrast with that collective “good” we were talking about before. Liuxiadong’s work and its strength are grounded in the belief that the bigger picture is created and transformed by an infinite number of very small, insignificant pictures. All of Liuxiadong’s production is based on those insignificant pictures. The meaning in Liuxiadong’s work comes from the apparently meaningless. The Macchiaioli were at the end of the day a marginal movement, a macchia or spot, in the larger canvas of art history. Still, they record a reality that would eventually become extremely relevant in both art history and in the economic structure of unified Italy. Futurism blossomed in the same places where the Macchiaioli and Veristi writers debated how to represent and narrate the world around then. The Future, we could say, was growing into the Present. Liuxiadong—observing the Present from both a privileged and underprivileged point of view, the undeniable power of Chinese immigration on Italian and Tuscan economy, and the subaltern role the Chinese communities played for a long time in Italy’s social structure—creates a third and complex dimension which is neither that of an outsider nor that of an insider. Is not even an in-between dimension. It is an utterly new state of mind that has yet to be defined and described. Liuxiadong is attempting with his work to do so, but he is aware that a much deeper inquiry needs to be undertaken and developed. His paintings are not revolutionary, in the sense that they do not subvert the existing reality or status quo, but they are potentially the seed of a revolution, meaning that they could eventually overturn the way we have perceived reality and its social frame. With any of his paintings based on the Chinese community in Florence and around itPrato, he questions the banality of stereotypes. He questions that “Made in Italy by Chinese” that is threatening the “Made in China on behalf of Italians.” Eventually, even Liuxiadong himself becomes a paradox of an artist. A much sought-after Chinese who is in fact looking at art through the lens of a Chinese reality made in Italy. He is not talking about the abused and tired idea of hybridization but simply about a different and totally new constructed DNA of a nameless individual who is just a citizen and free worker of The Republic of Consumption.



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MIGRAZIONI / MIGRATIONS

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi
Strozzina

22 aprile/April
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Dreams of Economic Glory: the crossed destinies of Prato e Wenzhou
by Giorgio Bernardini

The figures and the science of anthropology are clear. There is nothing random in the choice that has prompted tens of thousands of Chinese people to move to, live and work in Prato over the past thirty years. Migration to the Tuscan city on the part of these people, who all hail from a specific geographical, social and economic area of China, is the result of specific factors, of cultural compatibility and of complementary or mutual benefits between the local and oriental communities – an amalgam made of shared interests and legitimate aspirations as well as those that science would never call similar "ways of being". It is self-evident that History, with a capital "S", has in many ways encouraged and steered this path leading towards union. Nothing that has happened in Prato can be interpreted without also taking into consideration what was happening in the municipality of Wenzhou, in the southeastern part of the coastal province of Zhejiang, in the same period.

Yet in the phase in which the Chinese community was discovering and starting to settle in Prato towards the end of the last century, a clash ensued sparked by resistance, mistrust and contrast – a forgotten phase of "common growth" that made settlement possible, a phase that mingled internal physiological tension in each of the communities with the expedient, circumstantial tension of a "struggle among different players" who are in fact not different at all. That phase of conflict and variance is not yet over. And in any case, guessing what the future may hold for this process is a purely academic exercise unless we also analyse the reasons behind a migration that has been economically successful (for both communities), unless we probe deeper into the developmental characteristics of the Chinese migration to Prato.

Pioneers of war, explorers of peace

A little-known and little-analyzed episode in history informs us that it was the defence industry that brought the first groups of Chinese migrants to Italy. During the First World War, from 1914 to 1918, France requested low-cost Chinese labour for use in its factories which had been emptied of their native workers. The two countries actually forged an agreement in this sense. Ma Li, a French historian of Chinese descent and a lecturer at the Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale in the Pas-de-Calais, published a French National Centre for Scientific Research study in 2012 revealing the details of the accord and underscoring the fact that "the sources [...] speak of 93,000 workers". Many of these Chinese immigrants lost their jobs and wandered off to other European cities at the end of the war, several of them eventually settling in Milan. Their number was minimal and most of them were men, former workers who, on their arrival in the Lombard capital, recycled themselves as stallholders trading chiefly in silk ties and pearls. This was the first truly foreign migrant community to settle in Italy and it arrived well before the racial laws were approved under the Fascist regime. The group became a permanent fixture when some of the former workers married local women who had migrated to the city from the surrounding countryside. This historical reference is important if we are to understand the development of the Chinese community in Italy, yet without forgetting that the migration of this first group of people is not linked in any way to the mass movement that was to occur in the years thereafter, to the migration in the 1980s which was to lead to the establishment in Prato of the most important and impactful Chinese community in Europe. The migrant influx occasioned by the First World War was followed by a long halt that lasted for as long as Mao Zedong was in office, i.e. from the 1940s to the mid-1970s, because as everyone knows, he governed a country from which it was strictly impossible to emigrate. Even having a relative who had decided to emigrate long before was considered shameful for family still residing in the mother country. That is the watershed between the first and second Chinese migration waves to Italy, which are two distinct and unconnected phenomena. This technical difference between the first and second waves is confirmed by a linguistic aspect – thus a cultural aspect par excellence – which is found precisely in the Chinese language: first wave migrants are known as Huaqiao (or Chinese across the sea), while second wave migrants are known as Xin Yimin (or new migrants). It is the latter, the pioneers in a country that opened up to the "exploration" of world in the early 1980s, who were to form the founding community which has given rise to the community now established in Prato.

The great encounter

The reasons behind the second wave of Chinese migration to Italy – and thus to Prato – are linked to a political and economic process that concerns China as much as it does Italy. It fell to the Communist Party's reformist leader Deng Xiaoping, by a perverse twist of fate, to accomplish the true "revolution". This Chinese politician



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authorised his country's transition from centralised planning to a market economy in the 1980s. This led immediately to the reopening of China's borders and it gave the green light to migration (both from the countryside to the city and from China towards international destinations). At the same time, Italy's industrial and manufacturing areas, organised predominantly on a provincial basis, were experiencing their moment of greatest growth. Naturally, that equation in itself was not sufficient to produce the result that we can see today, consisting in a structured and stratified community in the city of Prato, but the first piece in the jigsaw was the opportunity for a linkup which was to materialise shortly thereafter.

Initial contact between China and Prato was established in 1975 when, in the summer of that year, a delegation from the embassy of the People's Republic led by economic counsellor Meng Chaokai visited the city's Twintex wool mill (Riccardo Cammelli, *Tra i panni di rosso tinti*, Carmignano, 2014). It was to be another ten years, however, before Chinese citizens made their first real journey to Tuscany. An initial group of oriental migrants, encouraged by the "new opportunity" boom and the need to seek their fortune far from their homeland, formed in Brozzi and San Donnino, two villages in the suburbs of Florence. It was the late 1980s, and the group consisted of men and women seeking, and finding, jobs in the leather industry, which was short of labour. Nothing was harmonious at this stage. The impact of a few hundred Chinese migrants on the two villages' tiny populations was instantly negative, leading to episodes of veiled racism and bitterness (Anna Marsden, *Cinesi e fiorentini a confronto*, Florence, 1994). The social hostility factor was also compounded by the economic aspect consisting in the lack of areas for production or for the migrants' residential needs. This led to the first break in the process in 1990, with the Chinese community moving to other, neighbouring areas. Their new destinations were Empoli, the industrial area of L'Osmannoro in Florence, and more especially, Prato. The Chinese set up their first workshops, specialising in sidelines from Prato's textile industry (which manufactures almost exclusively cloth) such as knitwear and the manufacture of clothing. These were areas of industry that showed excellent prospects for development and had a low access threshold. Prato's population registry in 1991 records the presence of a few hundred Chinese residents. It was the first time. The city rapidly experienced the phenomenon of "on-site relocation", with the Chinese migrants' low labour costs and flexibility encouraging Prato businessmen to commission new workshops in a segment of their own business. The era of cooperation and settlement had begun.

The crossed fate of Prato and Wenzhou

There is far more than a convergence of interests occasioned by timing in the story linking Prato to these migrants. The number of Chinese in the city grew exponentially in the space of ten years – from 500 in 1990 to roughly 5,000 in 2000 – and it doubled again in half the time, almost hitting the 10,000 mark by 2005 (Sara Iacopini, Unpublished research paper, 2014), the symptom of a drive belt that worked but that nevertheless pointed up weaknesses to which Prato society tended not to assign a great deal of importance. The first weakness was black labour: the great flexibility and low labour costs of which local businessmen were so enamoured were the product of the Chinese migrants' widespread recourse to black labour without regulated working hours and without a labour contract. But the people of Prato were well aware of the method, and at a time of common growth the last thing on their minds was to fault it. In fact, we may surmise that Prato was the perfect natural habitat for this kind of *modus operandi* in the labour market. And we may even surmise that the approach was actively encouraged, above and beyond any economic benefits to be gained from it. Many years before, in 1980, when there was not a single Chinese immigrant in the city, a report published by a French journalist in daily *Le Monde* described Prato as a haven of unregulated labour. One sentence was especially enlightening: "Certain workers earn as much as 1 million lire a month, but they too often allow a lung to end up getting burned by acid vapours, a finger to get mangled in a carding machine, or their hearing to go: some 80% of Prato residents are deaf. They, the people of Prato, appear to have coined the term self-exploitation" (Riccardo Cammelli, *Tra i panni di rosso tinti*). The headline of the article was prophetic and summarily associated Prato's fate with that of China: "Hong Kong Italian Style". The *Le Monde* journalist had got it wrong by only a few kilometres, because the Chinese who were soon to show up in Prato all hailed from the countryside around Wenzhou, a municipality on the far country's far eastern seaboard. The name literally means "hot district" in Mandarin. Under Chairman Mao, Beijing isolated the area because its inhabitants were considered "incorrigible capitalists" with an aptitude for trade. That aptitude was one of the things that the population of Wenzhou shared with the inhabitants of Prato, even without considering that territorial districts perfectly compatible with those existing in Italy were being set up in that part of the People's Republic in those very years. Deng Xiaoping was turning Wenzhou into a trail-blazing neighbourhood for experimentation and economic dynamism, creating specialised markets, and the less well-off in the countryside around the capital realised that they were going to have to find a way to get rich. That gave a strong



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impetus to migration, which is an endemic social process that feeds itself, and which became a road that led many of them to Prato. This process turned out to be a win-win operation for both communities (the Italians and the Chinese) and the economic benefits for both came to fruition in a cultural labour environment that was ideal for the new migrants settling in the area.

The conflict

The Chinese community in Prato currently comprises 26,000 legal residents. The number of migrants arriving in the city illegally has diminished over time thanks to the numerous amnesties that successive Italian governments have passed. Yet estimates based on the study of energy consumption levels suggest that there are anything from 5,000 to 15,000 illegal Chinese residents in the city. This means that there are approximately 30,000 Chinese residents overall in Prato today. In terms of sheer quantity that makes it the largest Chinese community in Italy, but if we consider the proportion of Chinese immigrants to the number of overall residents in the city – just under 190,000 – it becomes the highest ratio of any Chinese community in any city in Europe.

There are as many men as there are women. Chinese migrants in Prato are one of the most evenly balanced communities in gender terms, pointing to the "family-based" and thus stable nature of their immigration. (Sara Iacopini, Unpublished research paper). All of these factors come together to offer a fluid description of the community, with at least one generation of Chinese now having been born and brought up in Prato. These boys and girls have chiefly attended Prato schools and, unlike the first generation of migrants, they speak Italian fluently. Yet even though they have removed that crucial cultural barrier, Prato's Chinese have grown up in a climate of hostility from the local community, a phenomenon which has grown over the past fifteen years and which has been spawned by an economic attitude that has given rise to numerous misunderstandings.

At the start of the new millennium, many of the workers from Wenzhou who came to Prato completed the first phase in their own economic trajectory, putting money aside and acquiring sufficient skills to allow them to attempt to work their way up the production line. Some of them set up their own companies and became fully-fledged entrepreneurs in the clothing and knitwear trades, areas of the business in which they had been working as sub-contractors in their own workshops for two decades. And besides, the inclination to do business had been in their blood from the outset. "Poor people seek work, the people of Wenzhou seek business" is one of the most famous proverbs in China. The success of these businesses became instantly visible, especially on account of the ostentation with which some of the nouveau riche Chinese entrepreneurs displayed their wealth. Expensive cars were parked outside rickety factory sheds in Chinatown, and that inconsistency soon fuelled out-and-out social hatred of the Chinese community, a time-bomb which was soon to change even the city's political history. The start of the new millennium coincided with the start of the worst crisis the Prato textile industry, which had existed in the city for at least a century, had ever known. The new rules of globalisation delivered a lethal blow to the Italian textile industry, in addition to which the family-based manufacturing model went into decline and the generational turnover that should have pumped fresh life into the traditional factories simply failed to materialise.

When the Chinese began to become the "final entrepreneurs", their ties of economic and social subordination to the Italian community changed. A system of relations consolidated over the previous fifteen years collapsed and the economic crisis in the Prato district spawned conflict and misunderstanding, the greatest of which materialised amid suspicion that Chinese competition was replacing and killing the manufacture of textiles in Italy. Despite the fact that the first to know that the two areas of manufacturing are not in competition with one another were Prato's businessmen – who know the business backwards – that false legend gained ground and consolidated at every level of society, and it was accompanied by sudden rancour over the spread of the fiscal illegality to which numerous immigrant businessmen resort. Public opinion now faulted and abhorred such conduct. The citizens reacted ferociously, fuelling the appetites of politicians proposing "zero tolerance" towards the Chinese community. A centre-right coalition won the local elections in 2009 for the very first time in the city's history. The winning coalition's election campaign was based largely on the vituperation of the "illegal Chinese economic" system which, it argued, was responsible for sinking the city's economy. The centre-right's term in office lasted only the space of a single five-year mandate and it was thrown out by the people of Prato themselves, who failed to re-elect the centre-right mayor in 2014. It also ended without anything having been achieved in terms of the regulations that were not being complied with. In the meantime, the true black hole of Chinese immigration is looming ever larger – the black hole related to its failure to comply with regulations governing safety in the workplace. The dormitories and kitchens set up in their factories are a time-bomb threatening the Chinese workers' very lives, a time-bomb that occasionally explodes irreparably. Seven Chinese workers lost their lives at



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dawn on 1 December 2013 in a fire that destroyed Teresa Moda, a firm in the city's Macrolotto industrial area. The emergency is now hitting the international headlines, with national and international media taking an interest in the whole business and the Tuscan Regional Authority developing a (still incomplete) plan to stiffen monitoring and oversight in every factory in the district.

The event went some way towards allaying the rancour that had built up between the city's two communities and triggered a new phase of dialogue. The second-generation Chinese migrants have begun to play an active role, and several oriental associations are speaking out over the ingrained problem of the violence suffered in Chinatown, because the neighbourhood's inhabitants are prey to theft and robbery with astonishing regularity. This eventually led to a protest march attended by 2,500 people. Prato's Chinese took to the streets for the first time, becoming "China's Pratese".



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LIST OF THE WORKS

ROOM 1

LIU XIAODONG Chinatown 1, 2015, oil on canvas, 200x180 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Chinatown 2, 2015, oil on canvas, 180x200 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Chinatown 3, 2015, oil on canvas, 200x180 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Refugees 1, 2015, oil on canvas, 200x180 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Refugees 2, 2015, oil on canvas, 180x200 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Refugees 3, 2015, oil on canvas, 180x200 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

ROOM 2

Migrations 2016. Video, sound, 17', directed by Yang Bo, sound by Shi Qian. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio

ROOM 3

Documentary reportage "Chinatown, Prato" curated by Giorgio Bernardini

This room hosts a documentary reportage designed to accompany Liu Xiaodong's work with an account of the unique social and historical identity of the Chinese migrant community in Prato. The section is curated by Giorgio Bernardini who lives and works in Prato. Bernardini tells the story of the community's daily life with the sensitivity of a reporter and journalist who holds a degree in sociology. The three major issues addressed, and ideally split among the room's three walls, are: identity and the sense of belonging; conflict; and the crossed destinies of the two cities of Prato and Wenzhou, the area from which most of the Chinese living in Prato originally hailed.

ROOM 4

LIU XIAODONG Refugees 5, 2015, oil on canvas, 38x33 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Refugees 6, 2015, oil on canvas, 38x33 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Refugees 4, 2015, oil on canvas, 220x300 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Chinatown 4, 2016, oil on canvas, 220x300 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

LIU XIAODONG Europa Europa, 2016, oil on canvas, 220x300 cm. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong

ROOM 5 AND ROOM 6

LIU XIAODONG Photo paintings and sketches, 2015-2016. Courtesy Liu Xiaodong studio

LIU XIAODONG Photo paintings, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milano/Londra/Hong Kong