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## **RISE, FRAGMENTATION, INFRINGEMENT AND FEAR: EMERGING URBAN ISSUES IN CHINESE CLUSTERING IN ITALY**

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**ABSTRACT:** China is today facing a rapid economic development and the long-term implications of China's rise for European economy, society and culture, are constantly debated but still almost unknown. Moreover only recently a new volume edited by Kunzmann has clearly pointed out a peculiar field of research like the EU spatial impact of China's convergence in global market [1].

The aim of the present paper is to deal with the spatial issues related to the growing Chinese communities especially in Italy that are part of a more general and considerable transformation process of the traditional Chinese enclaves in EU cities: from recognizable "Chinatowns" to new hybrid urban formation where housing, retail, wholesale and even commodity production often tend to match.

Key-Concepts like rise, fragmentation, infringement and fear are useful in analyzing some of the more controversial socio-economic dynamics of Chinese clusters especially in a traditionally manufactured-based country like Italy, where it's recognizable a unique paradox of a "double competition" from outside and from inside. This statement poses a serious threat to local economic systems in terms of sustainability and social cohesion, making necessary to rethink the role and the nature of public action in facing new forms of marginality at urban and regional level.

**KEYWORDS:** China rise, Chinese migration, urban restructuring, clusters, local development policy.

### **1 CHINA OUTSIDE CHINA**

The international interest in China's affairs is mainly ascribable to the environmental impact of the Chinese emerging economies in the new global scenario, even if this is just one of the multi-faceted aspects of the awakening of what was once called the "sleeping giant".

It was argued by Arrighi, in his recent "Adam Smith in Beijing" [2], that the economic resurgence of East Asia is one of the most relevant event in the history of the last decades in order to explain the ongoing and unexpected process of global convergence between east and west, leading today by China<sup>1</sup>. This process moreover is not new but strictly embedded in the long-term rising path of the Asiatic "capitalist archipelago" expression of one of the most relevant late industrialization process of the

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of "convergence" is seen in Arrighi as the combination of the reduction of US global power with the contextual China's growth aiming at realizing, from a purely economic point of view and for the first time in contemporary age, a global market based on a better distribution of resources.

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periphery of development<sup>2</sup>.

More in detail this reflection finds some of his fundamentals in post-modern critical social theory who has focused since long the attention on the national but even transnational process of regional restructuring in which “prosperous industrial areas decline in tandem with the rapid industrialization of formerly less developed regional peripheries” [5]. For this reason China’s entry in global market confirms and completes a huge historical process of regional transformation with a clear exacerbation of questions like overexploitation of labour, increasing pollution and the unresolved unsustainable and massive urban growth that can be considered for its dimension a Chinese way to “post-modernity” [6].

However there are some differences that cannot be underestimate: first because, even if the development process presents some similarities, it’s obviously not comparable from a purely quantitative point of view to his neighbors and latter because, as it will be argued later, the contextual transformation of the former “prosperous areas” is far from being homogeneous and in some cases, especially in the South of Europe, related to fluxes of immigrants that are producing an unusual and ungoverned process of “ethnic import substitution”<sup>3</sup>. Chinese migrants, for their propensity in trade and production, are surely protagonist in this transformation.

The image of productive ethnic enclaves is not new in last years research in western countries but assumes new form and meaning in Kunzmann argumentation especially about the Chinese textile production clusters in Italy but more in general in the South belt of Europe often characterized by “infringement into urban backwaters” due to a relevant presence of illegal activities. The transition process of Chinese communities affects also the old and consolidated European “Chinatowns”, producing a new and still fuzzy geography of Chinese migration[7].

These new autonomous and self-sufficient communities are moreover part of global complex networks, keeping a strong relationship with their powerful mother country often in terms of commodities and workers supply, and the unusual combination of ethnic enclaves expansion and China’s economic growth, already cited here as “double competition”, can easily generate suspicious images in public discourse and media. The tendency is to depict and stigmatize, especially at local level, a condition of marginality as replacement of local or “authentic” activities and unfair competition emphasizing local conflicts between established citizens and new arrivals. The result is a generalized China’s fear, related to a wider defensiveness sentiment against migration, more evident especially in manufactured-based countries but present in the whole continent<sup>4</sup>.

The networks of Chinese enclaves are definitely growing, are strongly interconnected, and from the research point of view the “outside” impact of China’s growth tent to become more and more relevant especially for the weight of the phenomenon. The challenge in dealing with these emerging urban issues has to do with the capability of local governments in facing local conflicts depending on apparently unavoidable global transformation and to be able to distinguish between marginality, illegality and opportunity of local development.

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<sup>2</sup> The new geography of development of Asiatic archipelago has been interpreted mostly since the 1990s, especially for countries like Taiwan and South Korea, together with Japan, HK and Singapore has a result of a local path based on a peculiar combination of State intervention, familiar networks of enterprises and “social capital” development [3] [4].

<sup>3</sup> In this context I refer improperly to the politics of “import substitution industrialization” that has characterized especially Latin American countries in the early twenty century by producing substitutes for domestic goods previous imported generally, opposed to export-oriented countries like the newly industrialized countries of South East Asia or manufactured-based western countries.

<sup>4</sup> China’s fear, that emerges in the endless list of articles on local or national newspaper, has been also well represented in some and interesting artistic representation like the video Installation titled “I hate Karl Marx” (2010) by Rainer Ganahl presented at 6th Edition of South Korea’s Art Biennial, the “Media City Seoul 2010”.

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The perspective of this contribution is limited to the spatial dimension of the phenomenon and consequently to the required urban planning policies, often in late in facing these questions. The challenge is about the area-based policies required to deal with local complexity in order to be able to recognize, inside marginality, the economic potentials and the elements of originality of micro development path and to achieve eventually a socio economic sustainability in the next future and a more equal and inclusive spatial policy for multicultural neighborhoods inside European cities<sup>5</sup>.

The characteristics of this new socio-economic regime, based on regional productive restructuring and new migrations, has been widely described especially by sociologist, geographers and planners in the last years as a consequence of the so called “flexible accumulation” of capital<sup>6</sup>: in the following paragraphs I will show briefly some key points of this conceptualization stressing afterwards the elements of discontinuity that comes from the analysis of the case of Chinese migration in Italy. Around this point is possible to re-built new and more efficacious tools for local action.

## **2 MIGRATIONS, REGIONAL RESTRUCTURING, URBAN REGENERATION: NEW AND OLD QUESTIONS**

Migration and regional restructuring can be considered two sides of the same coin of the regime of flexible accumulation at global scale that gradually takes place in post-industrial transition of western countries after the 1970s. Nobody like David Harvey has clearly pointed out the role of urbanization process analysis in understanding the risks of this new and global system for cities: deindustrialization, unemployment, transition toward a service based economy, spatial polarization, global migration, ethnic segregation, unequal distribution of resources and informal jobs spreading [10]. One of the main urban consequences of contemporary global “spatial order” is the rising of de-regulated areas inside the formal city of developed countries: the other face of the convergence between the centre and the periphery, today called emerging countries<sup>7</sup>.

The sharp and pioneer analysis of Harvey on United States, and others on Europe, about the process of urban sectors impoverishment and contextual informal sector development are based on the empirical correspondence between unemployment or today labour transformations with marginalization in the new urban economy, with the rising of temporary jobs or informal supply of services but very often with the rebirth of extreme forms or out-and-out new sweatshops<sup>8</sup>.

It was argued for example that the return of sweatshops in United States, especially in the textile sector, depends primarily on low-wage international competition, but the problem is far to be just external; a more comprehensive frame for understanding the phenomenon has to take in account some changing internal conditions like a general social fragmentation without bargaining unit, but also the “race to the bottom” often due to a rising power of retail chains [15]. The increased mobility of migrants and the weight of illegal migration can easily fill the space open by the restructuring process. The consequent question of illegality is frequently associated to violation or infringement but depend basically on the “regulatory fracture” existing inside the advanced capitalist system, according to Saskia

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<sup>5</sup> The spatial policies for overseas Chinese communities can be considered part of a more general approach developed recently by social scientists on ethnic communities like for example the “Chinese community building” (CCB) [8].

<sup>6</sup> I refer to the concept developed by Harvey about the effects of post-modern transition [9].

<sup>7</sup> The list of theoretical contributions and study cases highlighted in the last years is too long to be reported here: it’s relevant to remember that the attention has been mainly focused on the relation between neo-lib policies in shaping contemporary cities and the rising of a “global south” perspective in facing the old and controversial dilemma of “development”[11][12].

<sup>8</sup> The relation between the new urban economy and the “world underneath” of informal jobs has been undoubtedly also protagonist in the sociological research of the 1990s [13]. For a more general approach to urban restructuring also in Europe see Moulaert, Rodriguez and Swyngedouw [14].

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Sassen, [16]. Migration for this reason is not a precondition of marginality but of course can become an explosive issue in some deprived urban areas in contemporary spatial and socio-economic order, especially where the illegal status can facilitates their relegation on the urban fringes.

An obsolete system of regulation at local level and, at the same, a general lack of knowledge in terms of new market opportunities and innovative organizations of work and social practices inside urban marginal areas let Sassen argue the need to rethink the role of public policies in terms of an evolution of the system of regulation both in labour and workplace conditions, both in land use and building regulations, advocating implicitly a new and protagonist role of public policy, often weakened in his prerogatives during the *liberist* 80's<sup>9</sup>.

The debate of the last years on ethnic minorities or diversities, local economic structure and urban space has been mainly focused on two main "schools of thought" not always in contradiction but different in their theoretical background that have had the merit, on the basis of a huge quantity of study cases, of raising new and challenging questions.

Diversity has been object of strong attention especially by economists, and the debate about the relation between ethnic diversity and economic performance is still open but considered a crucial theme for Europe in the near future. According to Alesina and La Ferrara the "economic failure of fractionalized societies" is evident but it's impossible moreover to generalize especially considering the creative and innovative potential of multicultural environment inside city [17].

Beyond a certain rhetoric around the so called "creative city" even for small and marginalized ethnic enclaves often characterized by unskilled labour the potential internal and cross-border connections within cities or with their mother country can represent an engine of development, and "trans-nationalism" a resources for ethnic business [18], but there is still a "need for further research that examines how transnational networks might produce distinctive competitive advantages for different cities and regions (as they continue to go "global") in a way that could combat the social and economic polarization that has accompanied neoliberal forms of economic development" [19].

It's seems still not clear to what extent "trans-nationalism" and the empirical evidence of a certain economic dynamism can be related to the other big aspect of ethnic minorities that is their spatial segregation in urbanized areas.

The explicit spatial issue of migration belongs, on the other hand, to different and more empirical approaches basically ascribable to practices of participation together with urban regeneration policies, with the contribution of sociologists, anthropologists and, of course, urban planners and designers.

Inside the consolidated formal practices of urban planning, regeneration has been considered mainly in terms of physical transformation of strategic urban sectors, very often with clear speculative intents, and more recently has gradually shifted to "urban revitalization" with an increasing attention of social innovation practices [20]. The general rediscovery of social dimension of urban practices has given priority to different topics but I will focus in this paper on those area-based experiences explicitly related to entrepreneurship networks strengthening and social inclusion processes in urban regeneration.

One of the first and more comprehensive research in addressing explicitly the link between urban regeneration and entrepreneurship development, with a special focus on distressed urban areas in western countries, is the volume published by OECD in 2003 titled "Entrepreneurship: a catalyst of urban regeneration" where are presented a series of different instruments to promote development especially in deprived neighborhoods: from microfinance to "special zones" and tax incentives in order to support new and small firms growth and social enterprises spread [21].

In the quoted US study case it's evident an overlap of different area-based instruments depending

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<sup>9</sup> Sassen presents in the mentioned volume her proposal for the city of New York based mainly based in the experimentation of a new land use policy able to correct the distortion of a property market seriously affected by the service economy and aimed at supporting central or semi-central location of low profitability enterprises areas (verificare meglio l'inglese) encouraging "de facto" local development processes inside deprived areas led by public hand.

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on a huge private-public investment across more than fifteen years<sup>10</sup>. The balance is positive especially at urban scale for the improvement in infrastructures, in public transportation and in safety but reveals some contradictions at the neighborhood scale. The combination of policies appears rather unproven and unfair in terms of local benefits and often precondition for gentrification [22].

At the same time the European experience shows an integrated view in addressing the problems of some cities, more and more less attractive for deteriorated housing, presence of low skills immigrants, very high rate of unemployment and decline of shopping functions especially in some areas in or close to the city centre. The diagnosis reveals a common destiny of industrial decline, in the examples quoted<sup>11</sup>, the formation of deprived areas and the experimentation of integrated area approaches fighting together physical degradation, social exclusion and economic decline [23].

Despite the efforts done by local authorities it seems evident that the main risk for area-based policies is the “dog chasing its tail” effect due to public investments that, especially in large-scale urban projects, solving or thinning the local problem of marginality reproduce outside the same. This is the old paradox due to the fact that “movement in time and the location of exclusion in space are not bought together and the spatial dimension of exclusion seems to take it for granted that people are fixed in space”<sup>12</sup>

It’s still difficult and not the goal of the present paper to trace a general balance of these heterogeneous experiences, even if they raise new and old questions in regional or urban restructuring processes useful to understand the Italian study case. What is interesting here is to explore now briefly some of the main features of Chinese clustering in Italy outlining some correspondences or discontinuity to the general discourse.

### **3 CENTRES AND PERIPHERIES: THE ITALIAN CASE**

Italy represents among the most industrialized countries an exception and an example of late industrialization where “flexible accumulation” since 1970s has assumed the original form of a productive decentralization characterized by spread of small and medium firms clustered in industrial districts, and by the original forms of inter-firm cooperation<sup>13</sup>.

Starting from the 1980s and the 1990s industrial districts firms has also employed new migrants, especially low-skilled labour force and, at the same time, they opened “niche opportunities for self-employed in workshops producing for Italian suppliers” as shown in Ceccagno (2003) dealing with Chinese immigrants. Chinese migration grows rapidly and shows a strong entrepreneurial aptitude representing the largest number of small firms owners among non-EU immigrants in Italy and, unlike other western countries like in the North Europe where “the Chinese are active mainly in the catering service, in Italy their main areas of activity are the production of ready-to-wear garments, leather

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<sup>10</sup> For example in the city of Chicago the “federal empowerment zones” aimed at realizing affordable houses, health services, etc., together with numerous tax incentives to encourage private investments and job creation, or the most traditional “tax increment financing zones” aimed at capturing the increases in private land value due to public investments to subsidize for example new commercial development, or strip mall or even manufacture activities, until the “industrial corridors”, a municipal program to promote the retention, the expansion or the relocation of manufacturing firms.

<sup>11</sup> The European study cases are Rotterdam-Hoogvliet, Strasbourg-Neuhof, East Manchester, Dortmund and Antwerpen but it’s also mentioned the instruments of “tax incentives zone” present in UK (“Enterprises zones”) and France (Zones Franches Urbain) .

<sup>12</sup> Originally the verbs in the sentence are in the past form; see Byrne (1997) [24].

<sup>13</sup> Basically this is the model of so called “Third Italy” that has been for long time considered a case of equal distribution of resources across the country and reduction of regional inequality, at least between the north-west and the NEC area (North-East-Centre). As references I just quote Bagnasco [25], and Beccattini [26].

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garments and bags, and woollen sweater. Until recently, these seemed to be the main productive sectors open to Chinese immigrants”[27].

Some dates can let understand better the weight of the phenomenon. During the 1990s the total number of Chinese increases in Italy, a country of peculiar industrialization and also relative recent migration, from more than 20.000 to almost 100.000, considering both official and non-official migration, with the highest rate of growth among the EU countries<sup>14</sup>. Chinese “regular” community grows from 58.844 in 2000 to 188.352 in 2009, considering the Italian national statistics<sup>15</sup>.

Until few years ago the main interests of scholars was focused on the two main Chinese communities in Italy: the one in Milan and the other one in the conurbation Florence-Prato [29][30]. Moreover a relevant presence of Chinese was registered in big or medium-sized cities like Rome, Naples and Turin and Bologna such as in provinces like Reggio Emilia, Modena and Treviso<sup>16</sup>. In many cases the relationship between migration and the industrial productive local base is explicit like in the textile district of Prato and Carpi (in the Modena Province) and in other provinces where more than 70% of Chinese migrants are spread all over the territory and not concentrated in just the main city.

The evolution of the Chinese migration shows some elements of discontinuity during the last years, as emerges in the Fig.1. Considering the first twenty provinces with the highest rate of permanent residence among Chinese the map shows the provinces with a balanced internal distribution of Chinese and the cities with at least 2.000 Chinese residents. Prato is still dominant doubling its Chinese presence (2003-2009) and arriving at almost 5% of the whole province population (It’s also estimated that there are other 20.000 illegal presence that led the percentage to almost 14%). Moreover the traditional areas of migration grow very fast but at a lowest rate than other relative small provinces like Rovigo, Teramo, Ascoli Piceno, Forlì-Cesena, Macerata, Padova, Venezia and Ferrara.

These provinces represent historically a different geography of Italian regional development that even if mainly based on textile, shoe-making or furniture industrial districts in some cases are located at the periphery of the big development process of the most industrialized areas of the country. I refer explicitly to those areas located in the Po River Delta Area such as some areas along the Adriatic coastline. Moreover in these cases the Chinese presence is not concentrated in the main cities but almost spread in small town or rather villages where is not unusual to find workshops in rural areas<sup>17</sup>.

The map shows clearly that there is a new configuration across the country of Chinese migrants that required different urban “images” and different urban policies. It’s possible to recognize at least three territorial typologies: big metropolitan areas like Milan, Rome or Naples, or the conurbation Prato-Firenze with inner concentration of Chinese in some central recognizable and specialized areas (like the famous area of *via Paolo Sarpi* in Milan or the so called area “Macrolotto 0” in Prato) and suburban industrial fringes; medium sized cities like Bologna, Reggio Emilia (but also Rimini, Ancona, etc.) that hosts more than 60% of Chinese residents in the main city of each provinces, normally in

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<sup>14</sup> In the 6<sup>th</sup> Report of International Organization for Migration emerges that formal and “illegal” Chinese population raised five times in Italy during the 1990s while just almost two times in France, UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain [28].

<sup>15</sup> Chinese community is today among the fourth largest groups in Italy together with Romanians, Albanians, and Moroccan. After Romanians it’s the ethnic group with the highest rate of growth in the last decade according to the data available in <http://demo.istat.it/str2009/> (checked the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2010).

<sup>16</sup> In 2003 official statistics reported that Chinese population in the Milan Area was 12.752 units and the one in Florence-Prato was more than 15.000 with a high index of spatial segregation. Moreover the other mentioned cases achieved at least a population of 2.000 units. See <http://demo.istat.it/str2003/>

<sup>17</sup> The case of the Province of Rovigo, with the second highest rate of Chinese migrants in Italy, shows clearly this phenomenon: the city of Rovigo hosts only 15% of the whole Chinese population, while at least 6 small villages (Adria, Badia Polesine, Lendinara, etc.) hosts from 3 to 8%. In some cases Chinese represent the first presence among foreigners (Bagnolo di Po, Villanova Marchesana, etc.).

recognizable neighborhood (like *Bolognina* in Bologna or *Miramare* in Rimini) where there is a balance between retail activities and production and between locals and foreigners; “dispersed city” that match with industrial districts with integrated Chinese activities, that grows more towards peripheral areas. The situation is much more complex than usually depicted but useful in avoiding easy generalizations.



**Figure 1** Chinese regional distribution in Italy (2009).

In Prato for example there is a high level of productive integration between the city centre and the textile industrial districts that means “de facto” an informal mixed-use of land inside “macrolotto” with an high level of ethnic segregation (3 - 4.000 Chinese, almost 10% of neighborhood population) and high rate of entrepreneurship<sup>18</sup>.

In Bologna the situation is rather different. Most of Chinese of the whole Province are concentrated in *Bolognina*, a neighborhood close to the historic city (1.549 Chinese, almost 5% of neighborhood population). Chinese own just 10% of shops and half of them are concentrated just along just one street, *via Ferrarese*. There is also a presence of workshops and warehouses<sup>19</sup>. Almost underestimate is the impact of Chinese communities in small town or villages in the enlarged territory of Italian dispersed city.

#### **4 RISE, FRAGMENTATION, INFRINGEMENT, FEAR: WHICH CONCLUSION?**

The rise of Chinese stabile presence in Italy has been characterized in the last decades by a process of urban fragmentation that has transformed visibly the urban landscape of same inner neighborhood of Italian cities. Moreover the formation of ethnic enclaves has polarized the attention on same critic areas like Milan and Prato with high level of segregation.

<sup>18</sup> I refer to still non-published working material coming from the final degree thesis of Enrico Russo titled “Strategie di riqualificazione urbana in contesti multiculturali. Il caso di Prato”, University of Ferrara. Supervisors: Francesca Leder and Guilin Verdini.

<sup>19</sup> I refer to still non-published research done by Tecnicoop s.r.l. on retail activities done for Municipality of Bologna. I was member of the group of works during 2008-2009.



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The presence of Chinese immigrants in a traditional sector of Italian manufacture, the spreading of the underneath informal sectors together with the strong competition of Chinese commodities from outside are the explosive mixture of a singular and new fear that is proved by the massive attention given by media to Chinese migration. The empirical evidences seems confirming partially the traced theoretical framework based on the relationship between regional restructuring and migration in general: especially the formation of deregulated areas inside big urban agglomeration and the rediscovery of sweatshops inside the socio-economical texture of contemporary cities. Moreover long-term analysis of Chinese territorial distribution seems to reveal some elements of discontinuity that cannot be underestimate in order to achieve a more efficient urban policy for those areas.

The macro-level analysis shows how Chinese immigrants has moved to new areas during the last years especially on peripheral and less dense areas. The influence area of Chinese migrants expands itself more and more from urban to suburban location of the so called “dispersed city” producing, in some cases, hybrid phenomenon of small concentration in rural areas.

These reflections open some questions about the nature of Italian peculiar path of industrialization especially about the formation of a new geography of marginalities among the industrial districts. It’s maybe not so far from reality that we will discover more and more Chinese sweatshops in the “countryside but the main question is still *what to do* in terms of public policy with the raising ethnic enclaves and with the Chinese one in particular?

The micro-level analysis of Chinese in *Macrolotto* in Prato or *Bolognina* in Bologna reveals different path of local development, from one side a slow process of transition between production to retail with high level of social conflict and on the other side a more integrated mixture of Chinese households and activities in one of the most multicultural neighborhood of Bologna. In both cases Chinese show high entrepreneurship capability even if very low level of participation in local affairs, relatively high rate of property access, growth of agglomeration process that can led in some localized areas to impoverishment or excess of specialization in specific commercial supply.

These conditions detached quite a lot from the post-industrial theoretical model (unemployment, neighborhood degradation, diffusion of rent among immigrants) introducing some elements of originality in the debate and producing a need to innovate or test new area-based policies and local entrepreneurship incentives. According to the three main different urban/regional typologies that seems to raise from recent evolution of the phenomenon is possible to recognize three main working lines for the future:

- big city or conurbation, like Milan, Rome, Naples or Firenze-Prato where the phenomenon of Chinese migration is embedded in the process of urban/regional restructuring with exacerbation of local conflicts. In this case it’s possible to image a public action able to address different ethnic origins, able to face cultural diversity inside complex systems of metropolitan *governance*, avoiding the *nimby syndrome*, and pragmatically involved in creating new systems of regulation and incentives in order to delocalize non compatible activities, to activate localized redevelopment processes or urban regeneration supporting “special economic zones” for low productivity firms inside or outside the enclaves, to promote quality of public space and commercial supply, to locate high quality function inside neighborhoods (University, Museums, etc.) related to Chinese, etc;

- medium sized cities, like Bologna, Reggio Emilia, Rimini with consistent Chinese enclaves presenting different composition of activities: from manufactured activities embedded mostly in the urban context to retail and warehouses. In this case the dimension of the problem seems to be more self contained inside the urban pattern and more adapt to combine physical transformation of space with experiments of inter-cultural integration or support to creative or productive local districts. Occasionally these contexts replicate in small scale big city problems;

- hybrid sub-urban, or rather rural territories of “dispersed city” where there is really an emerging need to reinvent an efficacious and original action for marginal areas.

The path is traced but the answers are still open. What is evident is that most of the models cannot be directly applied in a context where industrialization has followed a peculiar path but also where a

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relative young migration phenomenon is revealing its internal fragility. Applied research and practices are just at the beginning and only in the next future it will be possible to understand the effectiveness of public action and even the capability to interpret a situation continuously in movement.

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I consider this research as the “bridge” toward my new University, the Xi’An Jiaotong-Liverpool University of Suzhou (China) where my new colleagues have encouraged me in carrying on this work. XJTLU has also recently decided to support

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