

Chinese Migrants in Prato

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Translated by Purple Kwong

Prato is located in Tuscany, central Italy, and is the capital of the Province of Prato. It is only 20 kilometers from Florence, the famous center of the Renaissance. Prato is a small city with a population of some 200,000. Many Chinese live here, and it is considered the city with the largest concentration of Chinese people in Italy.

Some people say that more than 20 percent of the population in Prato is Chinese, but I think that nobody knows the real figure, because no institution has done any census. But generally speaking, people accept the figure to be in the range of 20,000 to 30,000. Nonetheless, this only refers to the Chinese with identity papers, or those who are active in the society. It does not include the large number of illegal laborers working in underground factories and restaurants. According to my observation, in Prato, despite the amnesty just granted by the Italian government, and in spite of the local government continuously checking the factories, there should be more than 10,000 illegal immigrants living in Prato. According to the statistics of pertinent departments, there are about 4,000 Chinese enterprises in Prato, mostly in the garment processing trade.

Most of the Chinese who have started businesses here are from the provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian. The pursuit of their golden dream in Europe began in the 1980's.

Since it is not easy to get a visa to Europe, more and more Chinese have come to their "heaven" here by illegal means. Today one can see many Chinese on the streets of Prato. Billboards and neon lights in Chinese are seen everywhere, and pedestrians on the

streets are almost entirely Chinese. The two not very wide streets are filled with Chinese restaurants, goldsmiths, supermarkets, clothing shops, Internet cafés, travel agents, barbershops, studios, and other Chinese shops. In a community occupying less than 2 sq. km., there are dozens of Chinese restaurants and Chinese merchandize shops. In Via Pistoiese, which is known as the Chinatown of Prato, there is almost no Italian person. Once when I passed through this place in a car with an Italian friend, my Italian friend said humorously, "Am I in China? In this place the Chinese are not foreigners; the Italians are."

Due to the language barrier, most of the Chinese laborers choose to work in Chinese factories. The working environment is very bad, and is even worse for the illegal workers, who do not have the right of abode. They are not entitled to public holidays; they have no medical insurance; they receive low wages; they are exposed to textile fiber, heat, cold, noise and to a 15 to 16 hour work day. The only motivation that drives them to work so hard is the salary that is more than ten times higher than what they could earn in China.

From 2009 onwards, tension between the town of Prato and the Chinese migrants has escalated. Many of the Chinese factories were closed down or are being investigated. The Italians have a bad impression of the Chinese. Many look upon the Chinese as tax evaders, those who snatch away their job opportunities, or who cheapen Italian brands. Moreover, criminal activities where the Chinese team up with Italian organized crime groups, have also mounted. These include not only the illegal import of textile products, but also people smuggling, prostitution, gambling, and money laundering. Other places in Italy also keep an eye on the situation in Prato, and the things mentioned above increase the hostility of the local people towards the Chinese.

There is a diversity of religious beliefs among the Chinese population of Prato. Most of the southern ethnic groups believe in Buddhism. The Chinese merchants in Prato donated hundreds of thousands of EURO to build a Buddhist temple in Prato, with the

permission of the local government. They also brought in a large number of Buddhist statues and musical instruments to carry out a grand opening ceremony upon its completion.

Christian churches have also expanded quite rapidly in Prato. They buy vacant cinemas, and convert them into venues for the faithful to gather and to hold activities.

With the increase of Chinese in Prato, the number of Chinese Catholics in Prato has also increased. Since 2000, Chinese priests have formally been assigned by the diocese of Prato to do pastoral and missionary work among the Chinese, and presently Fr. Francesco Wang is doing this work. In ten years' time, up to 2010, the number of Chinese Catholics has increased from less than 10 to about 150. The Catholic Church is very supportive of the Chinese, and Caritas has special services for them. A Chinese Catholic is also working for Caritas. The diocese has also assigned Fr. Wang to be the hospital and prison chaplain to serve the Chinese population. With the great support of the bishops' conference of Italy and the Prato Diocese, a Chinese pastoral center will soon be set up. This will provide a bigger venue for activities. I believe that the Chinese church in Prato will have a bright future and will produce abundant fruit.