

# New Italian Migration in the People's Republic of China

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## Abstract

In the panorama of international migration statistics, there is a progressive growth of registrations of Italian citizens residing abroad. In particular, the steady increase in consular registrations based in the People's Republic of China is striking. The expression "new emigrations" is an increasingly recurrent among scholars to highlight the quantitative and qualitative changes that have characterised Italian emigration abroad in recent years. The choice to emigrate depends on many factors, the very definition of new emigration calls into question aspects of the debate that imply a careful evaluation of the different components that characterize its profile. Which dimensions, above others, act on the choice to emigrate? Which aspects characterize the profile of Italians who decide to undertake an emigration experience in the People's Republic of China, albeit temporary? New Italian migration in Shanghai is a Skilled Migration?

In this article, we will focus on some results of a qualitative research conducted on the new Italian emigration to China<sup>1</sup>. More precisely, in the following pages we try to bring out which dimensions act in the choice to emigrate and which aspects characterize the profile of Italians who decide to emigrate to Shanghai.

**Keywords:** People's Republic of China; expat; skilled migration; new migrations

## Introductory note

The current complexity of global migratory movements is determined by the overlapping of routes and flows (Calvanese 1992, Castles and Miller 1993): it touches all countries (linking them together), involving people from all social backgrounds and their origin. Since the 80s, countries with a long history of emigration, such as Italy, have become transit areas for migrants. Moreover, in Italy there has been a significant increase in the emigration of people who are not motivated only by economic factors and by the so-called qualified migration (Pugliese 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> We report some of the main results that emerged from a research conducted by a working group that was formed at Ce.do.M.-Unisa (Documentation Centre on New Migrations), it has benefited from funding provided by the University of Salerno. A more extensive account of the research we did is to be found in Chirivì, Moffa 2022.

After the Second World War, Italian migration was characterised, among other things, by the fact that it mainly concerned the labour force (Pugliese 2002). Italian migration in the new millennium, on the other hand, shows a much greater diversity with regard to the status of the migrants involved.

We are basically witnessing a migration process that acts in society as a whole and is the origin of new cultural cross-breedings (Moffa 2014) that can't be analysed through more traditional schemes (Moffa 2014, San Filippo 2017, Moffa, Chirivì 2022). In these pages we will focus on the migratory<sup>2</sup> movements that have affected Italy in more recent times.

## Theoretical framework

The contemporary migration processes have created new scenarios and different opportunities for social and work integration, raising many questions about the size, nature and characteristics of the so-called new emigrations. The picture of current Italian emigrations is very complex and includes very different aspects. Regarding the Italian emigration, we will limit ourselves to briefly outline the essential aspects for the purpose of the reasoning discussed in the following pages. For more detailed information, please refer to the extensive literature which has covered this subject over the past three decades.

In this regard, they are referred to by way of example: (i) studies that have emphasized the differences between the second and third generation of young Italians abroad (Caltabiano and Gianturco 2005); (ii) the studies on diaspora and transactional communities (Vertovec 2005, Ambrosini 2007, Statham 2017, Ricucci 2017), (iii) the periodic reports on Italians in the world of the Migrants Foundation; (iv) the studies that report the specific aspects of the new Italian migrations (Bonifazi and Heins 2009, Filef 2014, Pugliese 2018).

Researchers started studying Italian emigration again in the late 1990s, when it increased significantly. The year 2000 saw the start of a research strand analysing new trends in Italian migration dynamics (Calvanese 2000; Bevilacqua et al. 2001a, b, Pugliese 2002, Corti 2003, Migration Studies n.155 2004).

In 2014, Italy was the sixth 'exporter' country of migrants (out of the fifty countries considered), gaining eleven positions in this ranking in just ten years (OECD Report, 2016).

On top of this we must consider the considerable increase in internal mobility. The UN Recommendations (UN 1998) define international migration "as the movement of individuals from their country of habitual residence for a period of at least 12 months". In statistical analyses, it should be considered that:

(i) A migrant may change residence several times.

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper we used extended concept of emigration to indicate human movement motivated above all by the search a better overall quality of life.

(ii) The educational level of those who emigrate is different than in the past, so Istat and Almalaurea data on Italian graduates must also be taken into account.

(iii) There is a greater presence of women actively seeking work abroad, with a reversal of traditional roles and the presence of men often following women (Moffa 2014).

(iii) There are also elements of discontinuity in the preferred destinations of emigrating Italians. Statistical analyses show that there are migration flows to new destinations, such as the People's Republic of China.

These changes open new interesting questions for the sociology of migration and, as a matter of fact, the new Italian migrations appears "nebula" (Pugliese 2018) and for this reason field studies are necessary to assess the different components of new emigration.

### Research topics

The resumption of Italian emigration calls into question aspects of the debate that imply a careful evaluation of the different components that characterize its profile. In 2018, the Documentation Centre on New Migrations Ce.Do.M.-UNISA of the University of Salerno launched a research with qualitative analysis techniques to understand which dimensions act in the choice to emigrate and which aspects characterize the profile of Italians who decide to emigrate to China.

More specifically, the work follows two specific directions of analysis. The first traces the socio-cultural profile of the subjects interviewed, through the reconstruction of their life, training and work trajectories, family networks and friendships. The second one focuses on the new context of life, on the opportunities it offers or on the criticalities experienced. The paper reports part of the research results, highlighting some aspects of new migrations from Italy. The reflections are based on fifty-three in-depth interviews and are part of a much broader project aimed at analysing the characteristics and dynamics of the migratory flows that have affected our country since the economic recession of 2008. In the panorama of international migration statistics, there is a progressive growth of registrations of Italian citizens residing abroad. In particular, the steady increase in consular registrations based in the People's Republic of China is striking. As of 2019, according to data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the registered Italians amounted to 10,779, noting an increase of 1,417 registrations compared to 2017. Also with reference to 2019, 36% of those registered are registered at the Consulate General of Shanghai. Overall, there are rather significant phenomena that invite us to reflect on which dimensions, more than others, act in the choice to emigrate and which aspects characterize the profile of Italians who decide to undertake an emigration experience in China, albeit temporary.

## Directions and Thematic Dimensions of Research

As mentioned above, in 2018 the Documentation Center on New Migrations (Ce.Do.M.-UNISA) of the University of Salerno promoted the research: "Italians in China. A small observatory on the characteristics of new migrants". The project lasted 2 years. We explore a direction, towards emerging countries, still at the margins of research and debate.

By doing this we are trying to add a new aspect to the increasingly complex picture of the Italian presence abroad.

The General Objective of the research was aimed at investigating a community of Italians in Shanghai. The specific objectives concern: (i) Aspects that characterize profiles of Italians who decide to emigrate to China; (ii) The aspects that characterize, above others, their choice to emigrate; Opportunities, or ties, Italians experienced in the new living environment.

With regards to the Research Methodology, we started from the analysis of the scientific literature and statistical information supplied by the A.I.R.E. (Register of Italian Residents Abroad) and of the Consular Registers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Since we could not construct a statistically representative sample of Italians living in Shanghai, we chose to follow the qualitative research route. To find the interviewees, we used the snowball sampling technique, trying to balance the group of interviewees by gender, age and origin. We conducted 53 in-depth interviews over 7 months - from March to October 2019 - with Italian nationals living in Shanghai, either temporarily or permanently, at the time the survey was conducted.

We selected the people we interviewed according to the period and length of time they had been in China, taking into account different characteristics such as gender, age, profession, etc.

In line with our research objective we identified individuals with migration experiences before and after 2008, with a stay in China of no less than three years. 2008 was for us a marking point in the migration flow, we decided to study the migration of Italians to Shanghai from this year onwards, as we are interested in investigating the aspects of the "new Italian emigration" (Moffa, Chirivi 2022), i.e., that component of Italian emigration that was triggered by the migration wave that started in 2008, corresponding to the economic crisis that hit our country (Gjergji ed., 2015, Pugliese, 2015). However, we carried out interviews with privileged witnesses who arrived in China a long time before, in order to have an overview of the changes in recent years. The component that refers to the "new Italian emigration" consists of 43 interviewees. A further 10 interviews

refer to privileged migrants before 2008; they offered their point of view in order to outline the differences between the two periods of migration.

The work unfolds according to two specific analysis direction: the first analysis traces the socio-cultural profile of the people interviewed, through reconstruction of life trajectories, education and work, family and friends. The second analysis focuses on the new lifestyle on the opportunities offered, everyday criticalities, on the portrayal and meaning the interviewees attribute to their migratory experience.

Our team defined the interview outline on the basis of previous research experiences conducted by Ce.Do.M.-UniSa and the most recent literature on the topic. As in our group's previous research, we specifically analysed: educational qualifications, individual and family economic and social situation, the absence/presence of family support for mobility, previous migration experiences, the relationship between professional qualification and the type of work performed and employment status in the country of arrival. The individual interviews were recorded in an alphanumeric string that summarises some basic characteristics of the person interviewed to ensure anonymity<sup>3</sup>.

These aspects were also linked to the different stages of the migration project

The contents of the interviews were divided into four thematic groups:

- (i) reasons for migrating and why did they choose Shanghai;
- (ii) experiences which characterised their migration path;
- (iii) perceptions of the context;
- (iv) aspects which characterised life in China and future prospectives.

The list of questions were aimed at understanding who the new Italian emigrants are that decide to embark on a migrations experience in China, what makes them leave in the first place, what migration paths do they take, what perception do they have of their migratory experience, what prospects do they envision for their future.

The approach used for the analysis of the interviews is part of the qualitative analysis procedures, which can be identified more precisely as a thematic analysis or qualitative analysis of the content.

### **Focus of the Group Interviewed and Analysis Goals**

Our research study group has the following characteristics: 28 females and 25 males; 4 people belonging to the 27- 30 age group; 12 people in the 31- 35 age group; 9 people in the 36-40 age group; 11 people in the 41- 45 age group; 9 people in the 46-50 age group; 8 people in the 51- 60 age group.

<sup>3</sup> For example the string [I1 M 37] matches interviewee n. 1, male, 37 years old.

With respect to the area of origin there are 30 people from North of Italy, 9 from the Center of Italy, 14 from the South of Italy.

Analysis of the interviews reveals specific trend lines that lead us to assess this flow as representative of a new “cycle of Italian emigration” (Pugliese 2017). The education and training levels of our interviewees are quite similar. More precisely, all respondents have at least a higher education degree (6), with a clear predominance of graduates (39), 3 have a master’s degree and a doctorate. The Geographical origin of the people interviewed does not show significant differences as the respondents come from almost all Italian regions, although more than half (30 out of 53) come from Northern Italy. Gender was balanced even if there is a slight prevalence of women (28 out of 53). The age group was balanced out, and there are 31 Italians in the 31-45 age group. Works experiences are of high professional level. Among the main reasons for emigrating we find the search for a satisfying job, business transfers and the decision to follow or join a partner. It is interesting to note that among our interviewees we also found “men” following their partners.

In line with research that focuses on highly skilled migration paths (Tomei 2017) and unlike the information found in other field studies in Argentina (Bernadotti 2015), Italian emigration to Shanghai is made up of graduates with educational backgrounds that are spendable in our country, in fact they have degrees that are considered “strong”. This figure reflects the high selection made by the country of arrival and the different reasons that characterise growing diversification of the current flow of Italian emigration.

It’s not possible to analyse all topics covered in this paper, and for this reason we will focus on an oriented reading of the descriptions and interpretations that the people interviewed gave of their condition. The purpose is to understand which experiences are definable as choice.

The aspects considered are perceptions and experiences in relation to the new context. We analysed the meanings associated to their migratory experiences in relation to the new context, starting from the definition they give themselves when referring to their status as migrants (expatriate, emigrant, etc.) and sense of belonging to a specific place (of origin or destination). Through the experiences we tried to understand how and through which strategies Italians set their daily lives in Shanghai, as a place of individual and collective experiences (family, life, work context, friendships, opportunities in relation to social life).

The specific analysis, introduced in these pages, questions the possible connections between the methods of approaching the new life context and the terms used, transposing the classic typifications of the emigrant, into the language; and the

baggage of the most commonly used terms and the feeling that bind them to the place they left.

### Some findings of research

The first questions refer to the perception of the migration experience, in this regard we asked ourselves which strategies were carried out and which feelings emerged when dealing with a world so distant geographically and culturally from home. More precisely, what does it mean to emigrate for work and what representations do they refer to when it comes to migration? A specific section of the research tried to cover these aspects through the terms used to describe their own migratory experience (Moffa, Chirivi 2021).

First of all, we see how the people interviewed define themselves in relation to their migratory experience. The first term analysed is emigrant.

The term Emigrant, according to those we interviewed, often refers to the stereotype of the emigrant with the cardboard suitcase searching for fortune or coming from poor and remote areas who moved due to desperation. The word is packed with meanings including non-positive traits and for this reasons they don't like using this term:

"The word emigrant to me, refers to someone who had no choice but to leave their country, it makes me think of an emigrant with a cardboard suitcase" [I19 F 51].

However, this aspect does not characterize all interviews, some attribute positive values to the emigrant term and consider the use of different terms to be improper. Only use this term to describe their lifestyle change:

"I'm definitely an emigrant. The word "Expatriate" or "Expat" was created by westerners to differentiate, presumptuously, from the migratory flows of developing or underdeveloped countries. In reality, the reason why populations have migrated since the origin of humanity is always the same: the chance of a better life" [I34 F].

"I always define myself as an emigrant!" [I36 F 32].

The second term which emerges is expatriate, the word Expatriate is often preferred as it connotes a more positive mobility condition.

"Expatriate! I don't really like the word Emigrant!" [I1 M 37].

"I'm an expatriate, I may be wrong but to me, the word emigrant, refers to "being forced to move", in my opinion an expat is someone who decides to move, and accepts it" [I47 M 39].

Some people like talking about the reasons why they don't like using stereotypical words to describe themselves; as if they can't find a correspondence of meanings with the perception they have of their migration experience:

"I feel like a citizen of the world, I don't feel like an immigrant, I don't feel like an expat, I feel like I'm just a citizen of the world!" [I46 M 47].

"I define myself as an Italian abroad" [I11 M 33].

"An immigrant tries to make a living in the new country; I'm just passing!" [I53 M 45].

"Luckily I'm just a traveller!" [I32 F 35]

Others in particular show a sense of belonging to Italy.

"I'm an Italian citizen of the World" [I51 F 50].

"Always Italian!" [I52 F 41].

"When I travel: citizen of the World. When I'm in Italy: European citizen. When I'm in Shanghai; emigrant. Always: Italian!" [I33 M 32].

Shanghai may be cosmopolitan, but it is far from that for those who consider themselves expatriates or emigrants. As a whole, these testimonies provide us with a clear example of how perceptions and representations are so different but also so similar. Different in the expressions used from time to time but with the same meanings because they express the awareness of being part of a new Italian mobility, with completely new characteristics compared to before. In general, the people we interviewed have different work experience, come from different family backgrounds, different contexts of origin, and they all have different motivations which pushed them to move in the first place; however a common trait emerged, they tend to project themselves toward contexts distant from their country of origin.

### **A Lifestyle Dimension Enclosed in a Bubble: Some Food for Thought**

Shanghai reflects the typical characteristics of a contemporary city. The global dimension of Shanghai overlaps with the perception often expressed by our respondents of feeling like citizens of the world. The cosmopolitan reality of Shanghai, appears a non-place especially for those who consider themselves expatriates.

The international dimension becomes the key to their migratory experience. Among the people interviewed who define themselves as expatriates, common elements can be found with respect to the way they live: they tend to build a network of relationships regardless of ethnic origin; they often take part in activities promoted by various Associations - an important reference to the Italian Community; children

attend international schools. A dimension of life that seems to be detached from the context, as if the whole experience was enclosed in a "bubble":

"Shanghai is not China. Shanghai is multiethnic, it's International" [14 F 40].

"Us expatriates live in what they call "bubbles". China is a big bubble for the expatriate!" [13 F 50].

"Us adults are on a high international level, our best friends are Israelis, Americans, German... there is a very big expatriate community here in Shanghai, it's very easy to mix with different nationalities and cultures" [12 F 48].

By analysing social relations, it emerges that Shanghai's internationality can also be traced to the network of professional and friendly relationships experiences by the people interviewed: an aspect of the latter that also affects those who consider themselves emigrants.

"My friends, the ones I spend a lot of my free time with, are Russian, French, German and American, there are so many Americans and French people in Shanghai; for business reasons I spend a lot of time with Chinese people, we refer to them as "International Chinese people" as they studied abroad and return to China fluent in English and with a more Western mentality" [17 M 27].

Compared to the forms of inclusion we find high forms of associations between Italians, personal/social networks mainly transnational communication with Italian friends and family.

The difficulties of communication due to a completely different language and the awareness of being in a context with symbolic-cultural dimensions so different from the ones they are used to, does not help build relationships with the natives:

"It's not like other languages, for example English, Spanish, you learn them quickly by living there or you learn them somehow or another anyway. Learning Chinese is so different, starting from the Chinese symbols" [15 M 33].

"This is the main impact: it's a completely different world. We have problems with the language but also with the food!" [123 M 33].

"They are a very closed community, it's so hard to make friends with them. They are so complicated: China and the Chinese!" [126 M 31].

"I expected them to be more open, I thought they would be more flexible even from a cultural point of view" [121 M 33].

In brief, the results of the analysis appear very complex and rich in elements for reflection.

## Concluding remarks

Our research work presents some elements in strong detachment with the research on emigration paths conducted on Italians in other areas such as in Argentina (Bernadotti 2015), in Montreal (Alberio and Berti 2020), and in Athens (Moffa 2019). The differences are marked by the push or attraction factors, the type of work carried out in the destination places and the strategies implemented to safeguard and/or carry out career paths or simply acquire professional skills.

From our analysis the aspects that accompany the choice to have a life experience in Shanghai are many, and distributed over different dimensions, it is not just about work. There are several implications and the points of attention are multiple depending on the content of the individual professions and depending on whether the experience of migration is a choice or a necessity.

We are, without a doubt, facing a migratory component with more tangible and intangible resources<sup>4</sup>.

From the interviews we see that experiences are accumulated by qualifying and satisfying jobs, but we must reflect that in spite of this, in some of the reports, feelings of nostalgia and mistrust for the future emerged.

The future, in particular, appears to be an element of uncertainty for a substantial component, not so much with respect to job opportunities but with respect to the “place” in which they will live (Shanghai, China, Asia, Europe, Italy, city of origin...etc.).

Most of them, sure enough, are projected towards other trajectories that mark other migratory experiences, which on the other hand contribute to determining a sense of uncertainty.

Regarding the integration processes, many of them still have a strong sense of belonging to their home town, their Original Identity, an identity which defines them and separates them from the rest. Shanghai’s global dimension overlaps with the perception often described in our interviews: citizens of the world.

Others are aware of it being a temporary experience, an awareness that not only favours them in the decision to expatriate, but makes them even more motivated to return to their country, full of new experiences and professional achievements and proud to redefine their sense of belonging to their country of origin.

Others feel the weight of a confrontation with a cultural dimension so different to their own, from the one they are used to, but at the same time they feel protected by the term “skilled workers” and because of this they enhance certain areas of the

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<sup>4</sup> It can be compared to the first phase identified by the Böhning scheme (1967).

city, reinforcing their cosmopolitan identity or new life trajectories marked by change and multiple perspectives. Regarding the future migration project the decision to leave, stay, return home... go elsewhere, are conditioned by other factors outside of work (married or single, with or without children) and are in relation to the usual meeting places (school trips and entertainment, relationships with natives, etc.) The implications are several, either it be a free decision or a necessity (decided by a company or by the context before leaving).

The interviews we gathered invite us to describe the emigration process as a result of the most generalised globalization process, so distant from the mobility measures that characterised, and still characterize, mass migrations

Undoubtedly we are facing a skilled migration but it is not just this, the interviews provide us with a greater complexity that does not end within this category. Furthermore, we must say that some trajectories are characterised by existential precariousness.

Our research contribution analyses the changed routes of Italian migration according to an approach aimed at bringing out the "spaces" - material and immaterial - generated by the new migratory waves.

In this direction, new lines of research are opening up which place the experience of new migrants at the center, deepening those aspects that characterize the new forms of mobility not exclusively dictated by the scarce opportunities available in our country.

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