

# Representations of labour mobility from China to Italy by worker writer Deng Yuehua

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**Abstract:** Within the many typologies of mobility between China and Italy, labour mobility is the one that is numerically most important, constituting over 80% of Chinese citizens living in Italy. In terms of cultural productivity, however, it is the one that is least represented. While Chinese international students who live in Italy are very active in the visual arts and individuals who reached Italy through other forms of privileged mobility are also well represented by their literary production in Italian or Chinese, immigrants who work in sectors that require lower skills appear to be under-represented as far as their cultural production is concerned. In this chapter, I introduce the work of Deng Yuehua, a migrant from Fujian who arrived in Italy in 1991. Since then he has been working in different factories and sweatshops run by other Chinese migrants while constantly publishing his writings. In the mid-2000s, he started publishing works in Chinese in local Sinophone magazines and newspapers, as well as on the web. I observe how his production revolves around the trope of the *youzi* 游子, the wanderer, which has a long tradition in his area of origin. Moreover, by drawing on the new mobility studies paradigm, I highlight how through textual analysis of the production by mobile subjects, we can infer knowledge on the implications of specific mobilities that would be hard to gain otherwise. Specifically, Deng Yuehua's work casts an important light on the private and personal dimensions of individuals who are involved in labour mobility flows from Southern China to Italy.

**Keywords:** Chinese migration, Sino-Italian writers, China-Italy labour mobility, Sinophone Italy.

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had a deep impact on many types of mobility globally. Although it is too early to predict in detail what the long-term consequences of the sudden change in individual mobility habits are, we can already see that the process of de-territorialization of many social and cultural practices initiated with the first lockdowns and quarantines will probably continue. Before the sudden immobility generated by Covid-19, however, we had witnessed an exponential growth of all types of mobility for several decades. In the China-Europe relations of the last 20 years, for example, there has been a steady increase in the number of Chinese visitors, who have entered, visited and stayed in the old continent for the most varied reasons (tourism, study stay, work).

If we focus on Italy, the most substantial form of mobility from China is the one originating from Southeast Zhejiang, especially from the Wenzhou area. The mobility from these areas to Italy can be characterized as a kind of labour

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mobility since it is constituted by mostly unskilled workers who choose to reach Italy to work in enterprises run by other former migrants who moved to Italy from China before them. This migration chain has the longest history when compared to the other significant forms of mobility between China and Italy<sup>1</sup> and, as a result, today roughly 70% to 80% of Chinese citizens permanently living in Italy come from Southeast Zhejiang (Ceccagno 2017).

Although the first modest migration flow from Southeast Zhejiang to Europe started in the first half of the XX century, it only began to increase significantly in the 1980s with the opening of China following Deng Xiaoping's reforms, and it gained substantial momentum after China's entry into the WTO in 2001, peaking around the end of the 2000s. Since the 2010s, while the flow of workers from China continued to some extent, more and more small entrepreneurs are choosing to return to China from Italy, while, in general, the pace of new arrivals is slowing down (Pedone 2013). In fact, the economic crisis that hit Europe in the mid-2000s made it increasingly less attractive for Wenzhounese small entrepreneurs to go to Italy searching for a business, whereas the quick development of the sending areas made it more convenient to invest at home.

The typical Wenzhounese migration project towards Europe of the 1990s and 2000s, however, shaped the Chinese minority in Italy as we still know it today. The migrants who undertook its path were aware of its dark aspects but confident of the final results. Before leaving, the first stage involved raising a small capital to pay relatives, fellow villagers or acquaintances who were already in Italy and who would have welcomed the migrant upon arrival. This sum constituted the migratory debt that the newcomer had to pay back through their own work in the following few years, once in the new country. Generally speaking, part of this debt was paid before departure as a form of deposit which was collected through informal loans, usually from within the migrant's family. The rest of the debt was instead paid off with one's work once the newcomer reached the migratory destination. The employer, relative or acquaintance who invited the newcomer offered food and accommodation from the very first day in Italy while withholding a certain amount from the employee's salary until the debt was paid off. Usually, the whole process took three to four years of hard work, after which the migrant could finally begin to accumulate capital to open a business and, in the future, possibly invite new migrants. The extreme flexibility and harshness of the working conditions faced by the newcomers were made clear to them before departure and were accepted as a necessary, but transitory, phase of the migration project (Benton and Pieke 1998).

Besides the larger flow from Southern Zhejiang, another migratory flow developed from Fujian, in particular from the Sanming district, towards the end of the 1990s. The Fujianese arrived in Italy through traditional migration channels, following the same migratory project as the Zhejiangese, to the point that

<sup>1</sup> While it is not the oldest form of migration from China to Italy, it is the one that consistently grew in numbers throughout the years and became thus significant in a relatively short time.

at some point it became common among Fujianese to marry people from some parts of Southern Zhejiang in order to enter the kinship network that allowed them to leave the country legally. Fujian has a rather long migratory tradition, dating back to the Tang dynasty (618–907). The province is also home to two of the five ports that were forcibly opened to trade with the West during the Opium Wars: Xiamen and Fuzhou. Many indentured labourers recruited by Western powers at the end of the XIX century came from this province and today a large number of Fujianese still live in different parts of Southeast Asia (where many Fujianese had already moved in the 17th and 18th centuries) and in the USA. Despite the long migratory tradition of the inhabitants of this province, the movements from Fujian to Italy did not involve the historical areas of migration but concerned the internal areas of the western part of the province, especially the city-prefecture of Sanming. With the era of reforms and opening up inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping, the Fujian coast developed faster than its interior. Sanming had been artificially transformed into a center of heavy industry during the Maoist era but with the advent of the new economy, based largely on the development of trade and light industry, the area quickly lost its wealth, which spilled over to coastal areas and left many workers in former state industries unemployed (Pieke et al. 2004). Today, the Fujianese in Italy often occupy the lowest position within the Chinese migrated group, working mainly as a low-cost labour force under very harsh conditions in enterprises run by Zhejiangese.

Inspired by the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006), which, despite its origin in the social sciences, advocates a transdisciplinary approach to investigate the relationship between movement, meaning and power (Cresswell 2006), I consider the labour mobility from China to Italy both in its entanglement with the economic and social contexts the mobile subjects experience and in the representational texts and cultural products created within it. When discussing migration studies as a crucial part of mobilities research, Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006) address the role of literary and cultural studies' potential to highlight the migrant subjectivity and 'nomadism' in the contemporary world. Merriman and Pearce (2017), on the other hand, focus on the specific contribution of the humanities in understanding mobility. They observe how, for instance, issues of temporalities and our perception of time and distance are often topics of discussion in literary analyses of chronotope and studies on migrant subjectivity, as well as in works by cultural geographers and studies of roads and experiences of travel. They argue that textual analysis, which typically constitutes the favored methodology within the humanities, can open new perspectives on how mobility is experienced since interview-based research often struggles to capture its unconscious and retrospective aspects. In the case of Sino-Italian textual production, the few works produced within labour-based mobility are especially significant because although the majority of Chinese in Italy arrived through this kind of mobility, the cultural production by Chinese or their descendants in Italy is almost exclusively published by a small elite of people who arrived through other privileged patterns. This leaves the experience of labour mobility from China to Italy short of "internal" representations.

The following pages will present how this experience is represented in the writings by one of the few such authors, the Fujianese factory worker Deng Yuehua.

## 2. Factory worker and writer Deng Yuehua 邓跃华

Although almost no proper research exists on Deng Yuehua, his detailed autobiographical works offer us a glimpse into the main events of his life. The third of five children, he had a difficult childhood which was first marked by health problems that prevented him from finishing compulsory school, leaving him illiterate until an advanced age, and then by the premature death of his father who was killed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which forced Deng Yuehua to leave his beloved Sanming to work as a woodcutter on the neighboring mountains at only 16 years of age. The solitude of the woods inspired him to study literature, which, in turn, uncovered his unstoppable creative vein. In 1989 he got married, but he left China shortly afterwards to try his luck in Europe, leaving his wife and their newborn daughter behind. He arrived in Budapest clandestinely in 1991, but he was soon expelled from Hungary after unwillingly getting involved in illegal activities. Taking advantage of a network of new acquaintances, he then moved to Prato, Italy. In 1996 he obtained the coveted residence permit that made him legal and allowed him to reunite with his wife. After three years, in fact, she rejoined him while the daughter remained in China with her grandparents to finish her studies until 2003, when she finally reunited with the rest of the family in Italy. Today Deng Yuehua lives in Montebelluna, an industrial town in the Veneto region with a large Chinese population employed in small garment factories run by Chinese. He works in a factory and in his spare time he writes and regularly publishes his works on the web.

To date, Deng Yuehua has only published online and in the Sinophone press in Italy. As will be shown in more depth later, since he writes exclusively in Chinese, his work has been published, often in installments, in some of the most popular Chinese language magazines and newspapers that are based in Italy and cater to Chinese immigrants. Besides in the paper version, all the works have also been published online, sometimes on multiple websites. The digital works obviously address Sinophone readers all around the globe. The websites that Deng Yuehua uses to publish his work are literary websites for self-publication (such as Jiangshan Wenxue 江山文学: [www.vsread.com](http://www.vsread.com)) or the web community of “Overseas Chinese” (such as [huarenjie.com](http://huarenjie.com)).<sup>2</sup> He also regularly participates in specialized literary contests held in China and Italy and occasionally won a few prizes.

His most representative works are the novels *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li* 我在欧洲的日子里 (My days in Europe) (Deng 2005), which was serialized in the

<sup>2</sup> He also opened several accounts on WeChat, Weibo, sina.com and similar platforms, to communicate with other netizens and share his writings. However, these accounts appear to be very unstable and change constantly.

Sinophone newspaper based in Milan *Ouzhou huaren bao* 欧洲华人报; *Dou xiang you ge jia* 都想有个家 (Everyone wants a family) (Deng 2007) also published in installments in another Sinophone newspaper based in Milan *Yidali Ouzhou qiaobao* 意大利欧洲侨报; and *Zhongguoren zai Yidali* 中国人在意大利 (Chinese in Italy) (Deng 2021), self-published on the literary platform *QQ yuedu*. In addition to the novels, Deng Yuehua has also published hundreds of essays, poems, and short stories in various paper and electronic magazines, blogs, and websites.<sup>3</sup>

Deng Yuehua certainly uses digital platforms and web communities to publish his work for their accessibility. The benefits of self-publishing his work online, however, do not end with the fact that the process is almost costless and immediate. Most of the platforms he uses also allow for comments and feedback from readers, a feature which becomes an especially important factor for works like those of Deng Yuehua that focus on the sense of nostalgia and on the premise of an 'imagined community' of compatriots who share his ideals and values. The many comments of praise and compassion from the readers echo his love songs for the homeland, contributing to the articulation of a collective expression of similar sentiments. Moreover, by making his writings available at no cost online, he naturally increases the number of readers who can potentially access his work, regardless of where they live, a feature which particularly resonates with Chinese migrants all over the world. While this process of de-territorialization of some creative practices has been an increasingly global phenomenon, it is especially embraced within contemporary Chinese society, as is evidenced for instance by the huge popularity of the so-called web literature in China (Hockx 2015). The transnational and mobile dimensions of the author, then, so important both in his life experience and in his production, find a perfect outlet in social media which are by their nature placed between the local and the global. On the other hand, when Deng Yuehua searches for recognition outside the web, he finds a suitable arena in very localized contexts, such as that of Chinese immigrants in Italy represented by the local Sinophone press based in Northern Italy (with a rather limited circulation) or in the various cultural events organized in his hometown Sanming, in which he participates by sending his writings celebrating local folk culture. The tension between the sense of belonging to a localized cultural community that has its epicenter in Sanming, different from the idea of a generic Han culture imposed from above, and the identification with the *youzi*, the wanderer, whose chosen destiny lies in intentionally being far from 'home', refusing to grow roots anywhere else, constitutes the thematic core of Deng Yuehua's written production.

<sup>3</sup> It was not possible for me to find the original issues of the newspapers where the works were published. However, I am in possession of the digital texts provided by the author. The quotes from the works come from those digital texts, unless specified differently. A selection of his works is today available on the webpage: <http://www.vsread.com/index.php/space/myspace?uid=34658&lm=1>. Accessed November 1, 2022.

### 3. Tailoring the working-class heroes

Deng Yuehua's production ranges from non-fiction and fiction prose to poetry. His non-fictional production has mostly been published on *Cina in Italia* (a Chinese-Italian bilingual magazine based in Rome) throughout the late 00s and early 10s and on *Ouhua shibao* 欧化时报 (aka *Europe Chinese News*, a Sino-phone newspaper based in Milan) when online communities such as huarenjie.com were not still as popular. Today, he posts his non-fictional essays on various blogs and platforms. In his early non-fictional essays and articles, Deng Yuehua focuses mostly on the difficulties encountered by Chinese immigrants in Italy regarding their social integration into Italian society. For instance, in a long article published in three instalments on different issues of *Cina in Italia* in 2007, he analyzes how a conflict between Italian police and about 300 Chinese nationals that happened in an area of Milan that was at the time defined by the media as a "Chinatown", represented a missed opportunity for both Italians and Chinese to start a real dialogue on integration. Although the theme of the social and cultural integration of Chinese in Italy is dominant in this early non-fictional production, it is surprisingly not particularly prevalent in his fiction, as will be seen further on. The same applies to the theme of ethnic or cultural identity, that is the theme of celebrating, defending and/or preserving Chineseness in a foreign context; even though such a theme is an absolutely prominent topic in the majority of Sino-Italian literature, in Deng Yuehua's writings it does not seem to have any relevant position. To be precise, the theme of cultural identity can be found in the aforementioned early non-fictional texts, and it even becomes crucial in the more recent non-fictional productions which, however, do not concentrate on a generic Han cultural identity but on the very specific Hakka Fujianese one, or better yet Sanming's cultural identity in its specific difference with the rest of Chinese cultures. These more recent essays are mostly published online on the author's page on the literary platform Jiang Shan wenxue and generally focus on folk music and traditions from the area of Sanming. In fact, the author feels very influenced by his sense of belonging to the local popular culture of his town of origin.

As for his novels and short stories, besides the autobiography narrated in first person entitled *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li*, they represent fictional characters who live through adventures resembling those experienced by the author. In fact, the stories Deng Yuehua crafts are inspired exclusively by the world of Chinese immigrants in Italy which he has come to know during the many years he spent in the country. *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li* tells the story of the author's travels from China to Hungary, which he chose as his first European destination for the specific policies in place in the early 1990s that allowed Chinese to easily enter the country without a visa (Moore and Tubilewicz 2001). In the novel, he explains how he was thrilled to be in Hungary as he had always been an admirer of the poet Sandor Petofi (1823–1849). Petofi seems to be an important life inspiration for the author as he mentions him in several of his writings, fictional and non-fictional. He feels especially influenced by the Hungarian poet's love for freedom, which Deng Yuehua considers an important value for himself too. For instance,

to explain his desire for travelling and exploring new places in contrast with his attachment to his homeland, in *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li* he mentions Petofi's famous lines: "Liberty and love/ these two I must have./ For my love I'll sacrifice/ my life./ For liberty I'll sacrifice/ my love".<sup>4</sup> Once in Hungary, the author was the victim of a judicial error and was temporarily jailed. He managed to leave Hungary and reached Italy, first working in Prato's clandestine sweatshops for a few years and then, after obtaining the much-coveted residence permit, he moved to Northern Italy and was finally allowed to invite his wife first and later his daughter to live together, united as a family again.

*Dou xiang you yi ge jia* is the story of a Fujianese woman who decides to move to Italy after she finds out that her husband cheats on her. She leaves China seeking freedom and a new life, along with her daughter. In order to legally enter Italy, she needs to get married to another Fujianese who arrived in Italy long before, after having left his first wife in China with the plan of waiting for an amnesty in Italy to get a residence permit that would allow him to finally be rejoined with her. However, the delayed amnesty caused the first wife to start an affair with another person in China, which in turn led her to divorce her migrated husband. The man, now alone in Italy with his son, decides thus to marry the protagonist in exchange for money to pay for the lawsuit with his ex-wife, who wants to be paid to allow her child to stay in Italy with his father. The rest of the novel is about how these two strangers, belonging to different classes (the protagonist is a rich woman moving to Italy looking for independence, while the "husband" is a man of humble origin who moved to Italy in search of better economic conditions), face the many difficulties encountered by Chinese lower-income workers in Italy, helping each other as if they were old friends. At the end of the novel, after having gone through all sorts of painful events together without ever considering themselves as a real married couple outside of their fake marriage, they realize they have grown feelings for each other and decide to spend the rest of their lives as a real couple along with their children.

*Zhongguo ren zai Yidali* follows a young woman from Fujian who clandestinely arrives in Italy hoping to make some money by working in illegal sweatshops run by Chinese entrepreneurs from Zhejiang. In Italy, she becomes close to another man from Fujian who also arrived as a clandestine from Hungary. He teaches her how to survive the very hard life of illegal sweatshop workers. At the very beginning of the novel, for instance, a sudden police raid at the sweatshop causes all the workers to flee in the night and hide in the fields soaked with rain. The protagonist and her friend find refuge in a cave, where they spend the night hiding in the cold winter. She has just arrived and is terrified of being found by the police, but since it is also her birthday, her new friend who is hiding with her manages to sneak a piece of cake with a candle to eat with her in the wet and dark cave in the middle of nowhere.

<sup>4</sup> I report the most widespread English translation of the famous poem. Petofi's poems and "Love and Liberty" specifically have been extremely popular in China, as he was admired by Lu Xun (Chen 2021).

The other novels and short stories all deal with the same kind of situations and characters, showing the reader a world of mutual help, trust, betrayal, sacrifice, intimacy and hope: a world that never surfaces in Italian language representations of Chinese immigrant workers.

Besides essays and novels, Deng Yuehua also authors many poems. He not only publishes his poems in Chinese language press in Italy and on various websites, but he also often includes poems in his non-fictional and fictional prose. Sometimes, he accompanies the poems with an essay (called by himself *suibi* 随笔, a specific kind of essay in Chinese literary tradition) in which he describes when and how the poem was composed and what it refers to. He explains how his compositions are mostly thought of as folk songs, in the vein of traditional folk songs of the area of Sanming. Especially in the past years, he has been producing poetic songs that are influenced by the tradition of Dragon boat songs, which is very deeply felt in the Sanming area. Another cultural element that has a powerful influence on the poetic production of Deng Yuehua is the trope of the *youzi*, the wanderer. The culture of the *youzi* is popular in the areas of migration of Southern China and it is celebrated in Zhejiang with a specific literary festival, the *Zhonghua youzi wenhua jie* 中华游子文化节 (China wanderer culture festival). The festival takes place in Deqing, the home town of Tang Poet Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814), whose poem *Youzi yin* 游子吟 (The wanderer's song) is considered to be the starting point of such a tradition. The poems of Deng Yuehua are mostly intended as celebrations of his wanderlust; he sings about the urge to leave what is familiar to discover the world, but also about the disrupting nostalgia the wanderer feels along the way for his hometown and family left behind. In *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li*, Deng Yuehua inserts his poems in the text as a further lyrical comment to the events narrated in the novel. It should be noted that by referring to a specific traditional sub-culture of Southern China that is particularly connected with the history of Chinese migration, Deng Yuehua, once again, does not focus on the central Han culture and does not seem interested in the debate about Chineseness intended in its patriotic or even nationalist sense, which is quite common in the writings by other Chinese in Italy. He feels a stronger sense of belonging to Sanming, to the Hakka culture of migration, and to an imagined community of travelers who cannot help but go far.

#### 4. Tales from the margin

The style of Deng's works is realistic and the language is simple and direct. Overall, he does not indulge in sentimentalism; the characters seem focused on forging their destiny more than chasing their feelings. We follow them in their daily struggles, which are described with no glamour, to the point that descriptions of private aspects of daily life like their bodily functions are included in what at times turns into almost hyperrealist writing. The atmosphere Deng manages to evoke in his stories is that of an underworld where moral degradation is common and fate is always behind the corner ready to frustrate all the



efforts made by the characters to improve their social status. Against this backdrop, Deng Yuehua's characters endure all sorts of hardships in order to fulfil their ambitions, which are framed as legitimate desires of self-developing and independence. This way, the reader cannot help but sympathize with the characters, who never lose their humanity throughout their adventures and, in a way, maintain a certain romantic carefreeness.

In the following excerpts, Deng Yuehua emphasizes the inhuman hours that the workers do at the sweatshops:

When everyone had gone to bed to sleep it was already dawning. At most, they would sleep four hours, after which they would have to wake up to go to work again. They had almost turned into machines now (Deng 2007).<sup>5</sup>  
 Having to work, the workers had absolutely no time to go out, just like caged birds. They spent the monotonous life of irregular workers: they ate, slept and only sewed, just like machines (Deng 2007).

While it is common knowledge that work shifts are unbearable in clandestine workshops, what Deng Yuehua's writings reveal is that the workers are fully aware of what they will face in these contexts and even appreciate the flexibility of a job that does not require any specific skill and can be dropped at any time. The following is a dialogue between a migrant who spent enough time in Italy to be finally able to open their own sweatshop and a newly arrived migrant:

"We intend to open our own factory and everything is already in place, but we just can't find a house to rent".

"How is it possible that you can't find even one?"

"Many Italians find the smell of fried food when we make sautéed foods unbearable, and they also complain that we work over ten hours a day, disturbing their rest. For these reasons, some Italians prefer to keep their houses vacant rather than rent them to us Chinese".

"He [*another long-term migrant*] also told me that working for the Italians is not bad at all, while running a sweatshop is hard, so why would you want to do it anyway?"

"Working for Italians does not allow you to put any money aside and the reason why we emigrated is precisely to make money. We must take advantage of the fact that we are still young and give our all, because once we get older, even if we wanted to, we could no longer do it".

"So having a factory here is very profitable?"

"If unforeseen events do not happen and there is work, you certainly earn well. Around here there are many who have made a fortune by running a home sweatshop" (Deng 2007).

What generates the sense of desperation and frailty, in fact, are not the working conditions offered by the *laoban* 老板, the owner of the sweatshop. Most of the time, the owner is just somebody who arrived a few years before and went

<sup>5</sup> Original texts in Chinese, all translations are mine.

through the same path. It is the Italian police and institutions that create a sense of imminent tragedy in Deng Yuehua's stories. The police arrive at night and close the sweatshops where illegal immigrants work and live. The owners get fined and sometimes lose all their money and their dream of accumulating wealth reaches a sudden halt. This event is portrayed as a tragedy for both the *laoban* and the workers. According to Deng Yuehua's novels, the workers are brought to jail and then released right after, but their jobs are lost at that point. Sometimes they also get fined. So when the police come, the workers usually run away and hide, possibly for days, with no money or documents. This scenario is presented several times in Deng Yuehua's works. The characters in his stories shiver any time they hear a siren, even if it is far away, even when they are not at work:

"My cousin told me that once, in the middle of winter, the factory was checked by the police and she had nowhere to go, so she was forced to sleep at the station," Wei Caiyun replied.

"Being able to sleep at the station is already a good result, because in many cities they are closed at night. That year, Chen Xinming and I also slept in a park and it was so cold that we could no longer feel our hands or feet. "

"How did you manage to endure such a tough situation?"

"I just can't remember how many times I cried in that period... once you have chosen this path you can only go on. When you are forced to, you just go on and everything passes." (Deng 2007)

News came from every direction of factories controlled by the police, where machinery had been sealed and employers and workers had been taken to the police station. Since many similar events occurred, everyone understood that in the area around Florence the police were hunting down illegal workers. At that time, even in the small town, the flashing lights of the police were often seen and their sirens were heard, so much so that everyone jumped in fear at the first sign (Deng 2021).

It was dusk when their employer got back in the car and, on his way to the kitchen, he turned to his wife, who was preparing the food: "A little while ago I heard that in the southern part of the city, old Li also underwent an inspection of the police." "It looks like we have to keep a low profile too, until things have calmed down," the woman replied. "Once this load is over, we will take a few days off and tell the workers to go into hiding," the man decided. He had just finished speaking when the doorbell rang. So he went to the side of the door and took the intercom to hear who it was. He found out so that the police were already at the entrance. He then put down the intercom and ran to tell the workers that the policemen had arrived and to escape through the back door. Then, they all put down what they had in their hands and they all poured out. Just outside the door there was a small clearing and in all directions there was only emptiness, which gave no way to hide. The clearing was surrounded by an iron net and outside of it there was the countryside. Someone opened the gate and everyone ran away into the fields in search of a place to hide (Deng 2021).

While Italian institutions appear as a continuous threat to the characters, there are neither anti-Italian sentiments nor any evident patriotic celebratory remarks in the writings of Deng Yuehua. The characters struggle to learn Italian, a competence that is depicted as incredibly hard to achieve as well as strategic in uplifting one's economic conditions. The workers in Deng's stories listen to Italian courses throughout the day in their earphones while they work at the sewing machines, resting exclusively to eat and sleep.

Lastly, another interesting aspect that comes out of these stories is the role played by the *laoban*. In these stories (and in reality) they are usually from Zhejiang, while the characters come from Fujian. This difference of origin sets a distance between the *laoban* and the protagonists, leaving the latter in a special form of isolation. Nonetheless, the novels portray the owners of the sweatshops as extremely caring and loved by their workers, a dynamic that is completely unknown by the general Italian readers. The *laoban* and his wife not only provide work (hence money) and a place to stay to the workers (usually a mattress with other workers in a room inside the sweatshop), they also cook every meal for them, sometimes work with them, and even take care of their recreational needs.

That *laoban* knew how to deal with his workers, he had extraordinary managerial and psychological skills. Twice a month he took us to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. I remember that we also went out for dinner that year to celebrate the mid-autumn festival. During the banquet, our glasses filled, the *laoban* stood up and, with a solemn voice, proposed a toast to our health: "Today is the mid-autumn feast, a joyful occasion that brings us together in front of this table, an excellent opportunity to tell you that in reality we are a big family: we work together, eat together and live under the same roof! Let's drink together for our health!".

That night, in a foreign country, far from our homes, we all celebrated together, drinking one glass after another. During dinner I drank a lot, but I was not drunk, I was happy to be able to share that moment of joy with others. We went home and all my companions collapsed to sleep. I laid down on the bed but could not sleep (Deng 2005).

It is in fact in the moments of joy and sociality among workers, in the friendship that blossoms in terrible conditions, that the world narrated by Deng Yuehua offers its more powerful revelation. By painting the warmth of solitary souls getting together, he restores a sense of humanity in the representation of a group, that of clandestine immigrant workers, which is otherwise only represented from the outside and only as a subaltern indistinct collectivity, deserving pity at the best. The following is the description of one such moment. Christmas is near and Italians will not need more clothes manufactured in the sweatshops run by Chinese immigrants for a while. It is one of the few periods in the year when the Chinese workers, who do not celebrate Christmas at home, can finally relax together, under the warm encouragement of the *laoban*:

Chen Xinming loved to drink, but even though he sometimes did it with Li Zhixiong, he had never played those drinking games. That day was a holiday and the atmosphere was more lively than usual, so the two started to play: they won and lost in turn, so neither of them was able to get the better of the other. It was very hot in the house and the four adults drank so much that their faces turned red and covered with sweat. Outside, on the other hand, an icy and pungent wind blew, while large flakes of snow slowly descended from the sky, which went to settle on the roof of the house, on the branches of the tree, on the large open space and on the road, thus giving Christmas that extra touch. The snow fell all night and the next day, when everyone got up and went out of the house to take a look, it was all covered in white and extremely beautiful. Since a thick blanket of snow had settled both in front of and behind the house, Li Zhixiong took a shovel and shoveled until the snow was all in one place. Then everyone went out of the house to make a big snowman. The one to have more fun was Tingting: it was in fact the first time she made a snowman (Deng 2007).

These images of warmth and affection among Chinese workers and with their *laoban* and *laobanniang* 老板娘 (female boss) are common in the world that Deng Yuehua creates in his writings. It is a world where new, unusual forms of familial ties are intertwined among strangers who are united by a similar destiny and who share dreams of freedom and emancipation. In this lays the evocation of the epos of the wanderer who creates new families and communities in a suspended time and space. These encounters are defined by their remoteness from home on one side and by the mobility of their subjectivities on the other. They represent the crossing of two or more mobility paths, ephemeral and intense: a moment of mooring along a path of incessant drifting.

## 5. Conclusion

In Deng Yuehua's novels, short stories and poems, the theme of migration is treated in two main tropes which in China, as elsewhere, have a consolidated tradition: the trope of nostalgia for the homeland and that of fascination for wandering. The author explores both to reveal how they constitute two forces that, by pulling him in opposite directions, tear apart his inner self, forcing him into a perennial melancholy. While the being pulled in different directions is in itself a trope of literature of Chinese migration, as far as Sino-Italian literature is concerned it is usually referred to a cultural conflict between the Italian and Chinese value systems that are generally depicted as being in open opposition. In Deng's writings, however, what is foregrounded is not the clash between two static sets of values and qualities, but the sense of belonging to a specifically situated cultural identity within China, that of Fujianese/Hakka travelers and migrants, which is in itself rooted in the tension between the desire of leaving and that of going back. In this perspective, the writings of Deng Yuehua incarnate what Clifford defines as routes that become roots (Clifford 1997).

The epos of the *youzi*, the wanderer, has a literary tradition in China that traces back to Tang poetry, if not before, when literati would write about their trav-

elling aimed at passing imperial exams or fulfilling bureaucratic tasks of various kinds. In recent times, this same epos has been recovered by a different class, that of the many migrant workers in China. A manifestation of such epos can be detected in the popularity of the so-called *liulang ge* 流浪歌, song of the vagrant, a type of pop music that became famous in the 1990s. Taking its name from Chen Xing's most famous song, *Liulang ge* (1997), this pop phenomenon had a great influence in inspiring and then consolidating a contemporary migrant worker culture in China. In these songs, travelling is not glamorized, as it is told from a "subaltern", a *diceng* 低层, grassroots position. However, while in the *liulang ge* phenomenon the attention is primarily focused on nostalgia and the desperation of being away from home, in Deng Yuehua's work there is the distinguishing layer of the untamed desire to leave, something comparable to an unquenchable thirst for cosmopolitanism. The dialectic between these two foci is what makes Deng's work an original case in transnational mobility representation.

In a recent article by Daniela Carmosino (2020), the scholar observes how the novel *Hong bai hei* 红白黑 (Red white black) by Chen He 陈河 (2012) shows how within the China-Europe mobility "a tourist can become a migrant and a migrant can become a tourist" (Carmosino 2020, 230). Just like those by Deng Yuehua, the novel she analyzes tells the intricate stories of several migrants from Zhejiang who travel to Europe in search of a better life. The scholar underlines how the theme of social mobility is dominant along with that of territorial mobility and identity mobility. In Deng Yuehua's work, we do find references to social mobility and, to some extent, it is also the same dream of social upward mobility that pushes the protagonists of his stories. Nonetheless, there is very little desire of patriotic/collective redemption in the patterns of social mobility followed by Deng Yuehua's characters. While in Carmosino's analysis the role of enfranchisement from a post-colonial identity in *Hong bai hei* is strong, the characters in Deng's stories do not seem to embody any specific national craving for global recognition, nor carry any prejudicial rancor against Italians. The people depicted in *Zai Yidali de Zhongguoren*, therefore, do not resemble the West-hating characters of *Beijingren zai Niuyue* 北京人在纽约 (A Beijinger in New York), the very influential Chinese TV series of the 1990s on the difficult parable of a Chinese trying to "make it" in New York. Although Deng's characters do struggle and in most cases only manage to survive without reaching the success hoped for, in their process of wandering they also open themselves up to "homing", they create unusual families, and they participate in transitory, yet welcoming, fluctuating communities of peers.

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