

Stories from the cities, stories from the sea

By Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte

*“But now we’ll float, take life as it comes.
We’ll float take life as it comes.”
PJ Harvey*

Our editorial relationship with Professor Daniele Brigadoi Cologna is long-standing, but with this publication, for the very first time, we have perhaps succeeded in the memorable feat of working on the same issue for several years.

It was 2019 when we decided to participate to a call promoted by the University of Padua and the Royal Holloway University of London for a project entitled Pearls from China.

Pearls from China had the goal to deepen and showcase the geographical mobility of goods and people in the mid-1920s. In particular, we wanted to document how the commerce of fake pearls by Zhejiang’s traders - who exported, imported and marketed them in different European countries - was instrumental in sustaining the earliest Chinese migration to Europe.

In 1925, in Germany, several hundreds of Chinese from Qingtian settled in Berlin near the Schlesischer Bahnhof (today Berlin Ostbahnhof), the historic terminus of the trains that arrived from Asia.

In the summer of the same year, in Spain, Madrid’s public opinion reacted with amazement to the sudden spread of Chinese street vendors of fake pearls through the streets of the city center.

A few months later, in February 1926, the same scene repeated itself in Italy, whe-

re the press and the prefectures of the Kingdom were alarmed by the sudden “Invasion” of the several hundred Chinese pearl peddlers who arrived in Italy in droves, mostly across the mountain passes with France.

Although this migration left an obvious mark in the statistics of the Chinese presence in France during the same years, only a few French sources on Chinese migration clearly cite the itinerant sale of fake pearls as an economic insertion strategy.

These pearls, made of colored glass, were often passed off as made in Japan items, or even as a Chinese product. Though the early batches of fake pearls sold may have been imported from the Far East; there is evidence of subsequent supply coming through Chinese and European wholesalers active in Paris, who mostly sourced their ware from Central European manufacturers.

We were supposed to go to Paris and study the Chinese presence and traces of the pearls, but because of coronavirus, we couldn't move and so we directed our research on the documents collected over the years by prof. Brigadoi Cologna and that we didn't have the possibility to analyze previously.

We researched for more than 3 years. What was fascinating for us was that the virus obliged us to change our plans and we went thru something really unexpected.

By profiling the main actors of the mid-1920s Chinese fake pearl trade, we have uncovered the story of a small group of Chinese from Zhejiang whose presence in Japan is proven by documents regarding the compensation requested for the mistreatment suffered following the 1923 Kanto earthquake, as well as by a few rare photographic documents.

There is also documentary evidence regarding the presence of the very same group of fake pearl peddlers in several European countries between 1925 and 1926, when they moved between Germany, Holland, France, Spain, and Italy.

We also discovered that Matteo Demonte's grandfather was one of those confined Chinese and we didn't know anything about it, but this explains why, all his life long, he always spoke with resentment of the Japanese, never missing the opportunity to speak ill of them.

We decided to focus on the turning point: repatriated to China from Japan after the Great Kanto earthquake, our main characters arrived in Shanghai, where

an intermediary agency offered them a chance to leave for Europe. There, a Sino-French company was recruiting sellers to sell a novelty product: fake pearls.

According to Chinese sources, in Shanghai and Wenzhou it was possible to refer to banking agencies that facilitated the procurement of passports and tickets for expatriation. To these repatriated migrants, those agencies provided useful contacts to refer to once they arrived in Europe.

By tracing trade and travel trajectories, we have defined a first route by ship that passed through the Suez Canal, and a second by train along the Trans-Siberian railroad.

This process explains the sudden surge of arrivals in 1925-1926: for many emigrants who had just returned from Japan, the money saved during the time spent working in that country may have barely just covered the price of the trip. That's why, when landed in Europe, they started working as peddlers selling fake pearls.

We found out that the pearls on which we were focusing on, were not produced in either China or Japan. Thus, it appears that those pearls may have mainly been produced in Europe. Chinese sources mentioning fake pearls among the goods treated by the wholesalers of the Gare de Lyon and the Marais, speak of them as "pearls of Romania", but other European sources point at the city of Gablonz, in Czechoslovakia, as a likely source, as between the two wars it had become a key hub for costume jewelry manufacture, with over four thousand companies on site.

Since the beginning, our intention was to create an animation to tell how the trade of fake pearls had been one of the drivers of the first Chinese migration to Europe, but we never got there. Instead, we focused on an unknown part of the history that saw Japan as first destination, because it was closer both physically and culturally.

Then, putting together facts and traces with a little of fantasy to connect them together, we produced a lot of drawings and a short script for our movie production. In particular, in the absence of direct evidence and with few available sources, we hypothesize a sort of What if, a possible scenario considering the individual characteristics of the protagonists that we know well because of their following European adventures.