



Italian Dumplings and Chinese Pizzas: Food, Migration, and Identity Between China and Italy

Gaoheng Zhang

Research brief prepared by Zixi (Peter) Zhang



“Ravioli Liu”, Prato, Italy. Photo by Gaoheng Zhang.

Key Ideas

- Food is more than nourishment; it is a cultural language. Studying food culture helps us understand how Italian and Chinese migrants understand each other.
- Chinese restaurants in Italy and Italian food in China are cultural bridges for immigrants and locals to negotiate their identities in relation to each other.
- Migration between Italy and China increased in the 1980s. While Chinese food offered Italians a taste of the exotic, it also became a target for racial stereotypes. Meanwhile, middle-class Chinese tourists embraced Italian cuisine in China as a signal of their global, multi-cultural identity exemplified by a taste on international cuisines.

Recommendations

- Food mobilities are central to migration stories. Policymakers should pay more attention to how everyday practices—like dining out or owning a restaurant—shape intercultural understanding.
- Media and public discourse should be more aware of how culinary narratives can both foster empathy and reinforce racial boundaries.
- Supporting migrant food entrepreneurs and promoting inclusive food cultures like holding food festivals can help combat cultural exclusion and facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

Today, at a time when cultural tensions across national borders are rising, Gaoheng Zhang’s study offers a compelling reminder: what’s on the plate is never just about taste.

For many people, an “authentic” Mexican or Thai or Ethiopian restaurant is often linked to immigration through the representation of a food and a culture from abroad. International restaurants offer customers a vibrant space to explore inter-group relations, immigration, and at times, discrimination and exclusion. In the case of Chinese migrants in Italy, fusion food has played a central role in how they and local Italians see and relate to one another.

Dr. Gaoheng Zhang, CMS affiliate and Associate Professor of Italian Studies, explores this intersection in his book *Italian Dumplings and Chinese Pizzas*. Since the 1980s, Chinese immigration to Italy and the subsequent opening of Chinese restaurants offered locals a taste of Chinese cuisine, while Italian cuisine—especially pizza and pasta—has become increasingly popular among the Chinese middle-class.

These culinary exchanges bring people together but also drive separation. In Italy, Chinese restaurants faced racial discrimination and suspicion, during both the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics. In China, Italian food carries both aspiration and ambivalence from Chinese customers who strive to forge their own international identities. Zhang’s work between Italy and China highlights how so-called food mobilities reflect and shape questions of race, belonging, and globalization. Today, as cultural tensions across national borders are rising, his study offers a compelling reminder: what’s on the plate is never just about taste.

Key Findings

The Growth of Chinese Food in Italy

Chinese food first appeared in Italy as an exotic novelty. The opening of Milan's first Chinese restaurant in 1962 was met with curiosity and interest by upper class Italians. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, Chinese restaurants had become common fixtures in major Italian cities. Chinese migrant entrepreneurs rapidly expanded the sector, offering affordable meals that appealed to local tastes while maintaining a sense of foreignness. These eateries adapted to Italian dining expectations, often mimicking local meal structures and incorporating familiar flavours. The restaurant Mi-Cucina di confine, for example, was an Asian-fusion restaurant that offered Chinese dim sum with fillings that were unusual to most "authentic" Chinese flavours, such as cheese fillings and black-color dough.

This Chinese food expansion came with mixed reviews. Chinese cuisine was both embraced for its exotic appeal but also dismissed as low-cost or inauthentic. Despite their economic success, Chinese restaurant owners also experienced racial stereotypes, labour exploitation, and cultural marginalization. Their businesses, though commonplace, remained labelled as "ethnic" and "other." Zhang argues that this culinary perception helped shape Italians' views of Chinese migrants—not only were the dumplings perpetually "foreign," but their makers were too.

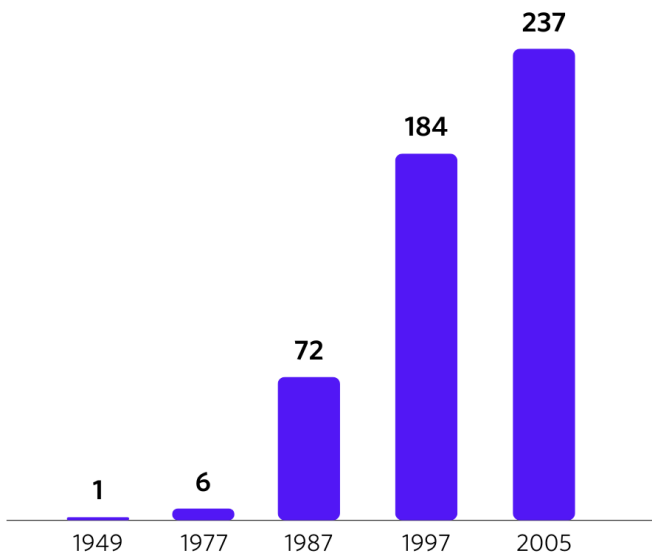


Figure 1. Chart of the number of Chinese restaurants in Rome from 1949 to 2005. (Source: Pierpaolo Mudu 2007)

Tourism, Identity, and Cultural Imagination

Since the 2000s, growing numbers of middle-class Chinese tourists have also traveled to Italy, drawn in part by the appeal of "authentic" Italian cuisine. Their experiences reflect aspirations toward global citizenship—or a desire for universal taste, education, and sophistication. Some Chinese travelers

sought fine dining and trattorias, aligning themselves with Italy's "Slow Food" ethos to indicate a sense of newly acquired modernity. For them, fine dining means more than just an expensive meal – it is a proof of status, a notion that the newly-developed Chinese middle class could appreciate fine, Italian cuisines just as the French or the English do.

Other Chinese restaurant goers embraced fast-paced food consumption shaped by experiences with Americanized Italian food brands in China, like Pizza Hut. On those dining tables, Chinese customers found their best manifestation of cosmopolitanism: everyone enjoying tasty cuisines regardless of national borders or race. These culinary exchanges reconfigure Chinese and Italian identities, though such spaces are also marked by class, race, and power. The ability to consume and define "authenticity" often remains uneven, shaped by access to mobility, media narratives, and economic privilege.

COVID-19 and the Racialization of Food

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how fragile cross-cultural solidarities can be. Chinese restaurants in Italy were among the first businesses to suffer economically—not because of actual public health concerns, but due to racialized fear and misinformation. As media outlets linked the virus to Chinese people and culture, diners avoided Chinese eateries, and racist incidents surged.

In response, local governments and activists used food to push back. Mayors dined publicly in Chinese restaurants; street artists created works honoring Chinese restaurateurs; and both Chinese and Italian media highlighted stories of mutual support. Food, in this context, became a medium of both stigma and solidarity. Zhang uses these cases to show how cultural narratives around food can shift rapidly, especially in moments of crisis. These reveal how quickly racial boundaries are reasserted, but also how everyday practices like dining out can be mobilized to resist exclusion and affirm shared belonging.

Methods

Gaoheng Zhang analyzes food culture using media reports, restaurant reviews, memoirs, graphic novels, films, and advertisements in both Italy and China, alongside field research and personal visits to restaurants. His interdisciplinary approach combines cultural history with food studies, focusing on how narratives about food shape understandings of race, migration, and identity.

Conclusion

The story of food between Italy and China is not just about flavour. As Zhang shows, food narratives are deeply embedded in how people understand and interact with migration, race, and class. Chinese migrants built their migrant identity around a powerful restaurant economy in Italy, even as their food was sometimes racialized or stereotyped. Italians, in turn, encountered Chinese food with a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

On the other hand, Chinese consumers embraced Italian food as a marker of cosmopolitan or international taste to develop a new middle-class identity. Across both contexts, food mobilities offer insight into how global cultures meet, clash, and adapt. In a world of rising xenophobia and cultural misunderstanding, these stories matter. Zhang's work shows us that the dining table can be a place of encounter or exclusion. The choice is ours.

References

- 1 Zhang, Gaoheng. *Italian Dumplings and Chinese Pizzas: Trans-cultural Food Mobilities*. New York: Fordham University Press. 2025.

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