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Dislocating contested space: resource competition, cultural technologies and migrant space in Milan's Chinatown

This paper explores the need to understand the cultural aspects of the production of space and the use of communications technologies in the Chinatown area of Milan, Italy, centred on Via Paolo Sarpi just to the northeast of the city centre. I argue that although we can understand some aspects of this space and Chinese migrants' production of it in terms of the history of Chinese, largely Wenzhounese, migration with its associated social and economic models and practices, in order to understand the dynamic negotiation of space in the restrictively controlled Via Paolo Sarpi we need also to incorporate the cultural use of contemporary communications technologies – smartphones in particular – into that understanding.

Key words space, migration, Chinese, Italy, technology

Introduction

In recent years the Chinatown area of Milan, Italy, centred on Via Paolo Sarpi (see Figure 1) just to the northeast of the city centre, has been the focus of political and planning manoeuvres on the part of the *Comune di Milano* (Milan city government) aimed at relocating established practices of principally Chinese wholesale trade. However, while these manoeuvres have resulted in little spatial relocation of capital – the businesses have largely stayed where they were – it has nonetheless seen considerable renegotiation of space itself. With the introduction of cobbled streets, partial pedestrianisation, traffic control, the levelling of kerbs, tree-planting and other measures, the street has been gentrified, in the sense of 'revaluing property and the desirability of place' (Schiller and Simsek-Caglar 2011: 14).[1]

This process might be thought of in terms of what Harvey and Krohn-Hansen have called the 'dislocation' of labour (Harvey and Krohn-Hansen 2018: 12), not so much because of the spatial movement – which has been limited – but in 'other senses of disruption or disorientation, such as the sentiment of feeling out of place, or of losing your bearings or sense of self as things move and change around you' (Harvey and Krohn-Hansen 2018: 12). Such a sense of dislocation directs our attention, in addition to the importance of spatial movement, towards the affective, experienced production of space. I argue that in the case of Via Paolo Sarpi, the 'disruption and disorientation' coincides with the social production of space itself through the use of contemporary media technologies, most notably smartphone and similar devices, in ways that ameliorate the effects of such dislocation.

I will suggest that we need to see contemporary media technologies in Via Paolo Sarpi not simply as technological tools for the organisation of local mobility, but cultural technologies (Kavoori and Chadha 2006; cf. Horst and Miller 2013: 13) as much

[1] This followed an earlier phase of gentrification which had already seen the exodus of the mainly manufacturing Chinese businesses from the area (Cologna 2008: 6).

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Figure 1 Via Paolo Sarpi 2015

part of a new 'social space' (Xiang 1999: 216) where migrants circumvented and negotiated efforts at control as the surveillance cameras that policed it.

Media and communication technologies are now unspectacular aspects of the mundane (DeNicola 2013: 93; Horst 2013), a feature that all too easily disguises the complexity of the social practices that involve them. With this in mind, this paper looks to explore examples of the mundane and unspectacular to highlight the complex assemblage of cultural, technological, political and historical factors that coalesce in the everyday production of a contested urban space.

I will explore this mundane production of space better to understand the complexity of the everyday street scenes related to the delivery of goods in Via Paolo Sarpi and the role that the technologically mediated social production of space plays in that complexity. I will argue that what we see in everyday street scenes, such as the delivery of goods to a wholesale merchant, is the negotiation of space as a set of contested resources with a cultural history. I will argue that while the city government in Milan, Italian media and in some cases local prejudice have challenged the presence of Chinese wholesalers in this part of the city in recent years, these efforts have had only limited success.[2] To understand why, it is necessary to explore the negotiation of social space in the area ranging from city planning ordinances through policing and media reports to delivery practices.

[2] In recent years there have been more efforts at collaboration between the Milan city government and the Chinese community in the Via Paolo Sarpi area to jointly promote cultural events, festivities and activities (Dr Federico Confalonieri, personal communication).

I argue that we can use the work of Henri Lefebvre and more recent anthropological approaches to urban and migrant spaces to explore the competition for urban resources. I argue that the digitality of contemporary migrant spaces in this area of Milan needs be seen as a culturally shaped coming into being that helps understand the limited success of efforts in recent years to displace Chinese wholesalers from the Chinatown area of Milan.

Mobile phones and digital space in Via Paolo Sarpi

The area of Via Paolo Sarpi has been associated with Italy's Chinese population since at least the beginning of the 20th century (Rocchi and Demonte 2017), even if the population then was measured in tens or hundreds and not thousands. This population fluctuated over the decades until the 1980s, when economic reform and greater travel opportunities in China saw a new wave of Chinese migration to Europe and elsewhere (Wu and Latham 2014). Milan's Chinatown saw a great influx of Chinese migrants rising to around 15,000 by 2008 (Cologna 2008: 6). At this time most Chinese worked in small manufacturing workshops or factories until the first gentrification of the area in the 1990s saw most of this business move to the suburbs or elsewhere in Italy. At this time the area became less and less one where Chinese lived and more one where they worked with a concentration of wholesale, import/export businesses (Cologna 2008: 6).

As in many other places, mobile phones have become a part of everyday life for many in the Chinatown area of Milan. This is unspectacular and unsurprising in itself, but does warrant further understanding of the spatial experience of the area which is as much 'augmented' (Manovich 2006) and 'hybrid' (De Souza e Silva 2006) through this use of digital technologies as it is physical and material. For most Chinese workers and residents in the area, this made Via Paolo Sarpi as much a mediated transnational space as a local Milanese one with technology largely used to connect to other Chinese (cf. Denison and Johanson 2009; Sun and Sinclair 2016). One Wenzhounese trader CZX in her 50s, who had been in Italy for nearly ten years and Milan more than four years, explained to me:

> My phone is not only my connection to China, it *is* China for me. It brings family, news, politics, business, everything to the palm of my hand. A lot of the time I am as much in China as Italy.

The principle platforms for her, and the majority of my interviewees, were WeChat and Weibo, the Chinese social media and blogging platforms through which she communicated with friends, family, business partners and clients in China, Italy and other parts of Europe (she had relatives and business associates in Paris and Barcelona, for instance), participated in various WeChat groups and gathered information of all kinds. CZX used Weibo largely to follow celebrity business bloggers who she particularly liked, though others used it also for linking up with other individuals for business or work, expanding networks in Italy and China and keeping up with news from both.

One of the most popular apps among Chinese in Milan (and elsewhere) was that of the Paris-based overseas Chinese portal huarenjie.com. This Chinese language portal aimed principally at Chinese in Europe with a particular emphasis on France, Italy

and Spain was set up in France in 2006 and by 2017 claimed 400,000 users of its app launched in 2014. The website and app offers news, chat, job and other classified advertisements, bulletin boards, personal web pages, dating services, blogs and much more.

Younger Chinese were often keen online gamers, either on computers or, for simpler games, on their mobile phones, playing various massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMPORGs) such as *Age of Wulin* (九阴真经) or *Moonlight Blade* (天涯明月刀), two of the most popular China-based games at the time of this research, or perennially popular international games like *World of Warcraft*. Those who had grown up in Italy often played with Italian friends but for many immigrant workers the main gaming language was Chinese and they played with or against other Chinese around the world, many of them also in China despite the inconvenience of time zone differences. For many of my interviewees this connection with China was more than simply entertainment. There were important social aspects to gaming (cf. Nardi 2010; Pearce 2009) which enhanced notions of identity, kept players in touch with friends in China and kept alive connections to their previous, pre-migration, lives. Video websites, particularly *Bilibili* (a Chinese YouTube-like platform) were also popular for watching Chinese films, TV series and user-uploaded content. Older users in particular used their mobiles to watch news, current affairs and documentary programmes from Chinese TV stations, with local or regional news from their home provinces generally popular.

YPY, a 23-year-old hairdresser explained the importance of her phone:

> I'm always stuck in [the salon] even when it's quiet. You don't know if someone might come in. My phone is my lifeline (救生绳). When we are busy there's no problem but when it's quiet I chat with my friends in China. We joke, share videos, just mess around and kill time. It takes me back home.

Alongside commonly used apps and functions such as phoning, messaging, search engines, cameras, music players, maps, etc., many Chinese interviewees who spoke little or no Italian also used translation and dictionary apps to interact with Italian-speaking clients, shopkeepers or service providers.

In these various ways, technologies were crucial components in the digital augmentation of the mundane space of everyday life, working to connect people to places and networks, friends and business associates, to maintain 'global families' (Krause 2018), facilitate manoeuvring in familiar and unfamiliar environments, manage the social implications of displacement and dislocation and delocalise the experience of urban space. Against this backdrop it is useful to consider some examples of how such technologies featured in moments such as mundane deliveries in Via Paolo Sarpi.

Deliveries in Via Paolo Sarpi

On a slightly chilly grey autumn day in 2017, WSP sits on a street bench in Via Paolo Sarpi, Milan, the so-called Chinatown (*huarenjie* 华人街, literally 'Chinese people's street') just north of the centre of the wealthy Italian city renowned, among other things, for its history, cathedral – il Duomo – connections to Leonardo da Vinci and the fashion industry. WSP, in his late 50s, swipes and scrolls gently down his slightly battered black Samsung smartphone, flipping between order notifications, a number

of personal and business threads on his WeChat, China's most widely used mobile instant messaging service, and the occasional photo or news article. In his 15th year in Italy, having navigated a diverse course of better and worse employment opportunities, WSP now finds himself, much as he does on many a day, waiting for a van to arrive in the semi-pedestrianised street. It is 12.00, which means there is half an hour remaining before his awaited driver could face a fine for delivering outside of the two and a half hour window imposed by the Milan city government in 2011 following the pedestrianisation of the street.

WSP knows most of the people in Via Paolo Sarpi and the streets in the immediate area, which, like Via Paolo Sarpi itself, are home to large numbers of Chinese-owned businesses, mainly clothing and fashion accessory wholesalers, but including among other things also cheap fashion retailers, grocers, supermarkets, phone and computer repairers, electronics shops, travel agents, bars, cafés and restaurants. More than 60% of the shop frontage is occupied by Chinese businesses with the remainder a mix of traditional Italian *botteghe* (small shops) such as the delicatessen and cold cuts shop, the butcher or the traditional gentlemen's hat store, Italian-owned bars, international supermarkets or fast food outlets and estate agents.[3]

Just after 12.10, GWQ, a distant relative of WSP in his late 30s calls over to him for help. GWQ has been standing next to five large cardboard boxes, heavily bound with wide brown and transparent sticky tape, each with a piece of white A4 paper stuck to the side with an address in nearby Via Cambio printed on it in bold black capital letters.

> Eh! … Eh … What shall I do? Feng was supposed to be here five minutes ago but I'm still waiting. He's not answering his phone. It's unlike him. F***. I need to be at P's in ten minutes…

'Huh. There's no problem. I'll have a look', WSP replies, leaping up from his bench, slipping his phone into his tracksuit pocket and heading off down the street.

One hundred metres further down, between Via Montone and Via Cambio, WSP meets a young Chinese man heading towards him with a chequered flannel shirt and pushing a barrow, the simple delivery device that has in recent years taken on the value of an ethnic marker in public discourses pertaining to this corner of the Milan landscape. Urging Feng to hurry up, WSP slows and then heads back as another Chinese man joins them en route to GWQ's boxes. Five minutes later all have been barrowed down the road to their destination, a clothing wholesale business operating from a second floor flat above another similar business at street level in Via Cambio.

WSP sits down once again on his bench and checks his WeChat. A voice message from the awaited driver tells him he'll be there in a few minutes – though five minutes later than expected. WSP sends out a small flurry of identical, concise texts that mobilise another group of four barrow pushers into action. Their arrival, as if from nowhere, outside the phone accessories store where GWQ, now on his way to P's, had been waiting is meticulously timed to coincide with a battered red van turning into VPS and pulling up just ahead of where the five cardboard boxes had previously stood. A flurry of activity sees the driver, WSP and the porters fling open the back doors of the van,

[3] In 2014, although officially Chinese residents in the Canonica-Sarpi area constituted only 1.8% of the total, Chinese businesses constituted 68.7% of the total with shop frontage in the Sarpi area, down slightly from 70.4% in 2011 (Cologna 2015a).

unload another pile of around ten boxes and immediately dispatch them on their way to three more addresses in the vicinity. By 12.29 there is no sign of any of the activity. The boxes, barrows and their porters have all disappeared, as has the red van and its driver. Meanwhile a white and green police car pulls up just down the road and a local policeman steps out to survey the scene.

The scene described above is mundane, unspectacular and everyday. It is the description of an everyday commercial practice – the delivery of goods to wholesalers – that could perhaps be found all over the world. However, the simplicity and ordinariness of this Italian street scene belies a rather more complex array of historical relations, public discourses and tensions that have effectively shaped that scene.

Via Paolo Sarpi as contested space and resource competition

Via Paolo Sarpi has been the home to Chinese immigrants in Milan for more than a century (Cologna 2008; Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 2017; Thuno 1999). Although in the early 20th century the numbers of Chinese were relatively small, this part of Milan started to build its reputation for being the area of the city where Chinese immigrants were to be found.[4] In the 1990s, with the maturing of China's open door policy, greater ease of overseas travel (legal or illegal) and the large wealth differences between China and parts of Europe, the USA and Australia, the number of Chinese immigrants coming to Italy started to boom (Wu and Latham 2014). Although many of the newly arriving Chinese in Italy were headed to other parts of the country, such as Prato, Firenze or the Veneto region, large numbers also came to Milan and the area of Via Paolo Sarpi started to become increasingly Chinese in character. The principal business of Chinese in Milan in the 1990s was manufacturing but as property prices rose, Via Paolo Sarpi became increasingly an area of wholesale trading (Cologna 2008: 8–10) of Chinese-produced goods from China as well as the emerging Chinese manufacturing centres within Italy itself (e.g. Prato, Firenze). It was at this time that more and more apartments in the courtyard tenement blocks in the Via Paolo Sarpi area started being occupied by Chinese businesses, dormitories and offices.

The street was renowned in the early 2000s for its chaotic traffic problem as dozens of small lorries and vans jostled for position to be able to load and unload their goods. Many parked haphazardly along the road, sometimes on the pavement, sometimes blocking the thoroughfare to other traffic and although many Chinese were, like others, frustrated at the difficulties this situation posed for themselves, they were nonetheless not particularly concerned about the issue. As one Chinese interlocutor put it to me in an interview in 2014: 'Now the street is nicer and before it was a bit chaotic (*you yidian luan*) but no-one stopped you coming and going (*lailaiququ meiyou ren dangzhuni*). Business was freer then (*zuo shengyi shi bijiao ziyou de*).' However, even if the Chinese were not greatly concerned, the disorderly parking did increasingly draw

[4] In 1911 there were 45 Chinese residents in Italy, largely in Milan. In the 1940s and 1950s they counted in the hundreds. The real boom in Chinese numbers in Italy started in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1981 there were 700, by 1991, 20,632 and by 2015, 271,330 (Rocchi and Demonte 2017). The vast majority – around 70% – of Chinese in Italy, including the area around Via Paolo Sarpi, come from the Wenzhou and Qingtian areas of Zhejiang Province in Southeastern China.

the attention of local media and the traffic police. Consequently traffic wardens started to patrol the area with greater rigour, issuing fines to illegally parked vehicles, many of them Chinese owned, on a daily basis.

The rising tensions accompanying this transformation of the area came to a head in April 2007, when a dispute over a parking ticket erupted into violent clashes between local Chinese and police. These riots drew national and even international media attention to the situation in the Via Paolo Sarpi area (Cologna 2008; Tarantino and Tosoni 2009). They also triggered the introduction of a series of measures that saw increasing pressure placed on Chinese businesses through heavier policing, stricter parking controls and repeatedly hostile Italian media representations of the Chinese community in the area. Anti-wholesale rhetorics, laced with racial overtones, clearly pointed at the Chinese community more broadly. In 2010, new regulations restricted delivery times and introduced 'curfews' for other activities – including the opening hours of Internet cafes, massage parlours and other businesses in the area. These restrictions, many of which were at least perceived to be unique to this part of Milan, were seen by many Chinese and others as deliberately racist efforts to limit the expansion of Chinese businesses in the area, if not to drive them out of business or out of the area altogether (see e.g. di Giambattista 2011). Indeed, this was the precise intention of Mayor Moratti's negotiations with the Chinese community at the time (Cologna 2008: 2–3).

Although the newly designed street was seen by many as an aesthetic improvement, it was nonetheless the heavy limitations on parking and delivery times that vexed many Chinese business owners in the area. Indeed, a number of legal challenges were made against the city government which were initially upheld by the courts in 2014 and 2015, forcing the city government temporarily to backtrack on several measures, only to be subsequently reversed. All vehicles were banned from the street except for a two and a half hour delivery window between 10.00 and 12.30 (see Figure 2).[5]

In this way, Via Paolo Sarpi and the surrounding 'Chinatown' area became the focus of various forms of contestation. Daniele Cologna, Italian academic of long-standing experience working with Chinese in Milan, explained in 2008:

> These efforts [to self-organise as a 'Chinese community' and identify their own leaders] have nonetheless set in motion a negotiation process to discuss the city government's proposal to 'delocalize' most – if not all – Chinese wholetrade [sic] shops, i.e. to move them from Milan's downtown Sarpi district to some other location in the city's suburbs. The Sarpi district was to be soon transformed into a 'restricted traffic zone', and eventually turned into a pedestrian area: a form of urban restructuring thought to be wholly incompatible with a thick cluster of wholesale trading shops, and in line with the demands of Sarpi's Italian residents, who make up about 90% of the people who actually live in the so-called 'Chinese district' and hope that a pedestrian area will force local shops to cater to local needs again, helping the district regain some of its bygone charm as a revamped middle class shopping district. (2008: 2–3)

Media rhetorics focused on the discontent and discord in the area with the implementation of the ZTL (*zona di traffico limitato* – limited traffic zone), often with implicit

[5] The legal challenges managed at one point to bring about the introduction of a second afternoon delivery window in addition to the morning one and also envisaged some early morning deliveries to restaurants and other food outlets.

Figure 2 ZTL restrictions in Via Paolo Sarpi

criticism of the Chinese community for creating the problems. Competition arose for the identity of the area, with various signifiers, from barrows to wholesale businesses, becoming negative ethnic markers in local and national media (Gigante 2008; Guerri 2010; Mingoia 2008). This was competition for the urban resource of space itself – who should have access to it, when, how and for what purposes, who should or should not be able to live or operate what kinds of businesses in the area. Those who sought to put pressure on Chinese wholesale businesses to leave were seeking to reclaim the space for other businesses and residents.[6]

In recent years, the tensions between the 'Chinese community', local Italians and the city administration have improved considerably with the organisation of joint cultural activities for the Milan expo in 2015, the choreographed celebration of Chinese New Year with a parade, street decorations and traditional foods becoming an increasingly important tourist attraction as well as artistic and cultural exhibitions. However, the ZTL remains and this competition over urban resources continues to be played out, however subtly, on a daily basis in Via Paolo Sarpi, in scenes like that described above. The timing of WSP's delivery and the use of barrows and bicycles was shaped by this competition for resources. In this story of contestation we can identify what

[6] As one local politician put it: 'Without relocation and requalification of the roads surrounding Via Sarpi, every solution to the difficulties in the neighbourhood end up being partial and temporary. The movement of the wholesale activities to another, more suitable, area is not only useful but necessary for the liveability of the neighbourhood' (Giambattista 2011: np).

Dragos Simandan, referring to urban contexts, has called 'delayed asymmetric counterforces' (2018: 4). For Simandan, competition and cooperation 'are fundamental features of social and ecological processes at all scales of analysis, from neighbourhood dynamics, to networks of global-city regions' (2018: 5) and such competition, he suggests, can be imagined in terms of forces and counterforces between actors such as, in the case of Via Paolo Sarpi, the city government and Chinese traders. The notion of asymmetry (not knowing how others will react) draws out the inevitable imbalance between the actors involved in terms of actions, capabilities, strategies and resources, while the possibility, even likelihood, of delay (not knowing when others will react) offers an alternative way of conceptualising necessity and contingency in the development of such competitive relations (Simandan 2018: 7). [7]

In the case of Via Paolo Sarpi, we have both an 'asymmetrical' imbalance between the players – the Chinese community and the city government – and the temporal play of delay. The Comune, at the end of the day, has ultimate jurisdiction, but the Chinese community has been able to delay, divert and eventually defuse contention in the area through legal appeals, negotiations, compliance and adaptation. The Italian legal system, with all its attendant bureaucracy, also introduces its own elements of delay. Against this backdrop we have to see WSP's organisation of the deliveries in Via Paolo Sarpi as part of this continuing process of compliance and adaptation through the constantly evolving social production of space.

Technology and the social production of mobile space

Writing about village enclaves in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou where former peasant farmers have become the landlords for thousands of migrant workers moving in search of work, Helen Siu (2007) argues that the notion of displacement needs to be detached from that of physical mobility. 'Grounded displacement' as she calls it 'could be a most intense form of displacement without the subjects moving anywhere' (Siu 2007: 331). For Siu, the production of village space – its spatiality – is about the social and political relations that constitute it, such that the displaced quality of village space is dislocated from the territory itself, from the city which is at the same time so near but yet so far. This slightly counterintuitive conceptual separation of displacement from physical mobility is useful for considering what is happening with the cultural contestation of space in Via Paolo Sarpi.

Henri Lefebvre in many ways laid the foundations for much of the contemporary work on space formulated in terms of scale, assemblages, actor-networks and more. At the centre of his work is 'an approach which would analyse not things in space but space itself, with a view to uncovering the social relationships embedded in it' (Lefebvre 1991: 89). For Lefebvre, space is not simply a 'container' in which social practices occur, but a complex social construction. Space is produced in and through social practices and dialectically affects social practices and perceptions in return. In his Marxist-inspired analysis, the production of space is commanded by the hegemonic

[7] In 2017, the city government launched a call for tenders for €96,500 to develop the cultural identity of the area encouraging the participation of members of the Chinese community (see https://web.comune.milano.it/dseserver/webcity/garecontratti.nsf/WEBAll/291D257E2ED05DF6C12581BB0027E461?opendocument).

classes and every mode of production produces its own space. Consequently space is also, or by definition, political. Space for Lefebvre is multiple and constituted of and through relationships:

> We are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as 'social space'. No space disappears in the course of growth and development: the *worldwide does not abolish the local* … Considered in isolation, such spaces are mere abstractions. As concrete abstractions, however, they attain 'real' existence by virtue of networks and pathways, by virtue of bunches or clusters of relationships. Instances of this are the worldwide networks of communication, exchange and information. (1991: 86; original emphasis)

We might notice, for our Milanese example, that Lefebvre, writing in the 1970s, is already anticipating the importance of information and communications flows and networks in the social production of space, something that has since become in itself mundane (Castells 2000; Manovich 2006; Moores 2012) and also the importance of 'concretisation' in the mundane and everyday, where concretisation might be thought of also as a theory of practice (cf. Bourdieu 1977). What is more, following such a formulation, we see that space is not something that actions, events or social practices occur *in* so much as a feature or product of those actions, events and practices and the social relationships that constitute and are constituted in them. Lefebvre is already pointing us towards the production of space as a theory of practice and agency, a relationship made all the more evident in cases of migration which 'has always had the potential to challenge established spatial images' and highlight 'the social nature of space as something created and reproduced through collective human agency' (Rouse 1991: 11). Corsín Jiménez, similarly highlights the link between space and agency:

> Space is no longer a category of fixed and given ontological attributes, but a becoming, an emerging property of social relationships. Put somewhat differently, social relationships are inherently spatial, and space an instrument and dimension of people's sociality. Social life is no longer to be seen as unfolding through space but with space, that is, spatially. Space is no longer 'out there', but a condition or faculty – a capacity – of social relationships. It is what people do, not where they are. (Corsín Jiménez 2003: 141)

In this light, WSP's mundane spatial management of deliveries itself produces a congeries of spaces that weaves agency into the material reality of Via Paolo Sarpi. However, this formulation lacks attention to technology, mobility and the importance of time. WSP's production of space was not static. It was mobile, historically and culturally situated and, in part, mediated.

Not only are media technologies now mobile, but they play key roles in our experience of, how we engage with or, in the terminology of this paper, how we produce space (García-Montes et al. 2006; Kleinman 2007; Moores 2012). In fact, we should argue that space is now itself as mobile and dynamic as the technologies and the people that are producing it. WSP, and others like him in Via Paolo Sarpi, slipped effortlessly between different spaces through his mobile phone. One moment he was checking pictures from relatives in China and other Italian and European cities, the next picking up information on the whereabouts of his delivery, the next reading news about his

hometown in Zhejiang province. All of this is regardless of his specific location in the street or whether he is himself actually moving or not. What we have to consider, however, beyond the obvious ability to multi-task on a mobile phone, is that each of these activities constitutes a mobile production of social space understood in terms of lived, practised, culturally and historically situated relationships.

The moment of social action as a point in the flows of temporal and spatial coincidences is neither contingent nor necessary but is the point of articulation of various spatial/temporal planes. Compared to contingency,[8] which suggests a certain randomness, this moment of social action/space, laced with the tensions of asymmetrical forces and expectations, is situated, planned for, the outcome of past actions and takes on a fleeting relationship to the future. Just as for Heidegger the relationship between causality and technology is less one of effecting than one of being responsible for, of 'bringing forth' (Heidegger 1977: 9–10), so we need to think of space as more about a coming into being than either a random event or a determined outcome. The 'becoming' of historically and culturally situated technologies carries with it a relation to the past, of anticipation and coordination or coincidence. As space – produced through the practice of social relationships – is increasingly produced using digital technologies – chatting, messaging, viewing images etc. – that are also often mobile, so the social relations produced with those technologies and space itself are also mobile. In this way space itself also has agency in the unfolding of mundane events.

Social space and agency in Via Paolo Sarpi

The agency of social space is not a relation of causality, like a spatial version of technological determinism, but, as we have seen, is one of becoming. It might be thought of in terms of a network of actors and actants (cf. Latour 2005) or an 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, cf. Leong et al. 2009) and following Lefebvre's formulation of 'lived' space mediating between abstract and concrete space (Lefebvre 1991: 33, 38–9). Like Bourdieu's *habitus* (1977), space has a complex relationship with structure and structuring, being dynamically produced and yet simultaneously producing social practice. Yet thinking of space in this way requires us to break with the structure/agency mode of thinking. Rather we have to think what are the social relationships, past and present, that shape the social production of space. In the case of WSP's deliveries, there is not only the local history of contestation over urban resources, but there is also a mobilisation of culturally situated attitudes and practices that feature in the social production of this particular Milanese space. As we have seen, technology is at the centre of these practices and we can start to see how we need to pay some attention to 'the differences in culture which determine what a particular technology becomes' (Horst and Miller 2013: 13). We need to understand the cultural aspects to the social production of space.

[8] 'To say that an event or process was necessary means that it was inevitable, inexorable, or "bound to happen": nothing could have been done to prevent its occurrence. Conversely, an event or process can be labeled "contingent" if it resulted from an improbable, chancy alignment of events, such that in a theoretical re-run of history its occurrence would happen only in a small minority of alternative possible worlds' (Simandan 2018: 3).

Writing about Wenzhounese migrant villages on the outskirts of Beijing from the 1990s onwards, Xiang (1999, 2005) identifies the emergence of a new 'social space' in which migrants had 'created their own lifestyles, values, rules of behaviour and social networks … not well integrated in the established structures of the state' (1999: 216). Over a period of decades, migrants established what Xiang calls a 'non-state space' in Beijing's *Zhejiangcun* ('Zhejiang village'). Tomba (1999), writing about Wenzhounese migrants in Italy 'whose self-organisation recalls that of Zhejiang village in Beijing' (1999: 280) suggests that: 'The two communities [in Zhejiang Village and Florence, Tuscany] are different expressions of a common migration strategy … Their features can be traced back to the original imprinting of the [Wenzhou] model' (1999: 290), a model characterised, among other things, by 'informal practices' and working in the 'shadow economy' (1999: 291) which have continued to the present day (Cologna 2015b; Krause and Bressan 2018: 276; Ceccagno 2018: 182; Becucci 2008).

In fact, Xiang identifies three characteristics of the *Zhejiangcun* 'social space' which, despite different times and places, are relevant for understanding business practices among many Chinese in contemporary Milan. First, 'when it comes to state-society relations, their key strategy is to dodge the attempts of the state to interfere with their life and business' (1999: 241). Second, 'The community elite builds up power within the community in ways that are sanctioned by community structures and norms rather than the state' (1999: 241). Third, key to the business success of Wenzhounese traders was the early recognition that money could be made through overcoming physical spatial barriers and distance using telecommunications technologies (1999: 229). Through the deployment of their traditional networks, the structures of power internal to their own communities, their history of autonomous migration and self-sufficiency, their ability to circumvent state power and authority, their acute business acumen and the strategic deployment of communications technologies, Wenzhounese operated in their own social realm. For Xiang, Wenzhounese migrant space is about power and relationships.

The contested space of Via Paolo Sarpi needs to be understood in a similar way. I once chatted with WSP over lunch in a small Chinese restaurant near his business premises just off Via Paolo Sarpi. The restaurant was full of Chinese clientele on their lunch breaks with the occasional curious Italian. Throughout the lunch WSP checked his WeChat account every couple of minutes and he received three phone calls, one of which related to another delivery.

A van on its way from Pavia had got stuck in traffic and had missed the Via Paolo Sarpi delivery window. WSP was directing the driver, not familiar with Milan, to a closed down petrol station just near the end of Via Paolo Sarpi on Via Volta, next to a small derelict park often populated with local homeless people. 'Drive onto the forecourt and message me', WSP instructed the driver after five minutes of rather fatigued and expletive-strewn instruction as to how to find it and negotiate the one-way system.

'It used to be easier,' he explained to me after finishing on the phone.

> When we used the cemetery you could tell drivers just to use GPS – write in Monumental Cemetery, Milan and you were done. They always found it straight away. For some reason GPS often sends them the wrong way round. It's hit and miss. The cemetery was harder work because it is up the road and you had to barrow things down but at least they found it more easily. Then they closed it off

to stop us meeting people there, but the petrol station is much closer. It's small but it works for now.

A couple of years previously, a common sight in the road and rough ground surrounding the southern entrance to the Monumental Cemetery – the resting place of many of Milan's rich and powerful since the 19th century – was that of a collection of vans and cars with Chinese, usually men, intently looking at their social media, making phone calls and gazing occasionally down the road towards Via Paolo Sarpi, seeking their arriving contacts. This was one of the preferred waiting spots for local Chinese businesses and delivery drivers.

'We have various waiting spots (*dengdai de difang*) in the area', WSP continued, 'But you have to move around otherwise the police get to know where you stop and cause trouble. It's like cat and mouse, but GPS generally makes it easy enough for the drivers, even if they don't know Milan. If they [the police] have a place covered I just text [the driver] on to the next one. It's always like this', he said. 'In China we have to get around the rules (*raoguo guize*) – in Italy we get around the police (*raoguo jingcha*).'

Prior to coming to Italy, WSP had worked in various cities in China, initially for relatives and later running his own small businesses. This experience, he explained, was crucial for learning how to deal with authorities. When I asked who 'we' referred to, he replied: 'Us people who do business' (*women zuo shengyi de ren*), which for WSP meant people from Zhejiang, and Wenzhou in particular.

This conversation illustrates how for WSP – and many like him – doing business was a matter of manoeuvring with the authorities, which in Milan – just as Xiang found in Beijing – translated into contestations over local space. The spatial restrictions on business represented the physical manifestation of a more abstract game of 'cat and mouse' which Wenzhounese business people had long been playing, not only in Italy but also back in China and elsewhere. Both, in different ways, constituted the spatialisation of the Other.

This site of contestation between Chinese wholesalers, the city government and hegemonic media representations is constituted through similar structures of business and cultural autonomy, evasion of authority and the ability of migrants to 'create the structures of a non-state space through their strategies of daily life' (Xiang 1999: 242) as found among Wenzhounese business people in Beijing and elsewhere. WSP's unspectacular but highly effective smartphone-facilitated manipulation of this contested space on that chilly autumnal morning in 2017 and his mundane coordination of deliveries through WeChat and GPS were good examples of such strategies. What is more, understanding that digital production of space in the context of circumventing the authorities' historical efforts to redefine and recreate the identity of that quarter of Milan requires understanding WSP's smartphone as an instance of, in Miller and Horst's terms, culture determining what a particular technology becomes.

Conclusion

This paper has explored a number of issues related to notions of dislocation, displacement and the contestation of space. Chinese in Via Paolo Sarpi in Milan are physically dislocated migrants, displaced from their places of origin in China. However, we have seen how, with the social production of space, new technologies have enabled them in some ways to overcome this physical dislocation. Following Harvey and

Krohn-Hansen, we have seen that beyond physical displacement, dislocation also points to other senses of disruption or disorientation. Siu's 'grounded displacement' also points to how such dislocation can apply as much to those who stay still as those who move. We have seen that Wenzhounese migrants have historically found ways to ameliorate the effects of such dislocation by the production of their own social spaces. With the use of communications technologies, principally smartphones, we can see how such socially produced space is dislocated from physical space. This dislocation has come to play a key role in spatial contestation of resources in Milan's Chinatown.

The recent history of Via Paolo Sarpi reveals itself as a history of competition for space, for its definition, character and value. This has manifested itself at various times as a competition for resources and in recent years information and communications technologies – the Internet, mobile phones, messaging services like WeChat and so on – have transformed the nature of the spatial resources involved. The augmentation (Manovich 2006) of space in the digital age challenges the finite nature of urban space as a resource. I have argued that to understand this production of space we also need to see the use of communications technologies, so fundamental to it, in terms of cultural 'becoming'. Smartphones were playing a key role in the development and evolution of cultural attitudes towards authority, government and the execution of business practices. Chinese, largely but not exclusively Wenzhounese, in Milan were engaged in processes of contestation and circumvention of authority that related not only to the immediate context of Milan, but drew upon cultural resources, attitudes and practices developed over a long history of migratory practices and experience.

Returning to Via Paolo Sarpi, I suggest that such an analysis helps us to understand the complex agencies involved in shaping WSP's deliveries. The social production of this space can be understood as the coincidence of several ontological planes of agency ranging from local politics and rhetoric through the implementation and contestation of city planning ordinances to WSP's mediated planning, coordination and organisation. From this analysis we can come to understand the dynamics, in no small part facilitated by smartphones, that have favoured pragmatic adaptability in the competition over urban resources. With this increasing importance of technologies, the nature of the resources – social space – themselves have been fundamentally transformed. The social space of Via Paolo Sarpi is no longer, if it ever was, coterminous with the material space over which the city authorities have jurisdiction and which local political forces have sought to control, a conclusion that helps explain the limited success of efforts to move Chinese out of the area.

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Dislocation de l'espace contesté: concurrence des ressources, technologies culturelles et espace des migrants dans le Chinatown de Milan

Cet article explore la nécessité de comprendre les aspects culturels de la production de l'espace et de l'utilisation des technologies de communication dans le quartier chinois de Milan, en Italie, centré sur la Via Paolo Sarpi, juste au nord-est du centre-ville. Je soutiens que – bien que nous puissions comprendre certains aspects de cet espace et de la production des migrants chinois en termes d'histoire de la migration chinoise, en grande partie wenzhounese, avec ses modèles et pratiques sociaux et économiques associés – afin de comprendre la négociation dynamique de l'espace dans la Via Paolo Sarpi, contrôlée de manière restrictive, nous devons également intégrer l'utilisation culturelle des technologies de communication contemporaines (les smartphones en particulier) dans cette compréhension.

Mots-clés migration, espace, technologie Italie, Chinois