

Francesca Ling  
Coluccio Saluti Award

I am sure my fascination with Italy started at birth, when my parents gave me my Italian first name. Italian food became my favorite cuisine, and the Renaissance became my favorite historical time period. Needless to say, I felt *born* for this semester in Florence. In eager preparation, I took extra precautions trying not to look like a tourist. I quizzed all my friends who had been abroad for advice, browsed Italian fashion blogs, and even downloaded the “Italian for Dummies” app on my phone. When I breezed through the train systems on my way to Florence, my efforts were to blend in were a success. Ticket from the machine? Check. Validating in the yellow boxes? Done. The research was working! I thought I was prepared. I thought. Because nothing could have prepared me for the ways that I would be told I stuck out.

It started in the markets. Sellers would yell out, “Ko-ni-chi-wa!” from the stands. At first, it did not register that they were talking to me. But it kept happening in various permutations and if I did not answer to the Japanese greeting, I would hear the Chinese, “Ni-hao!”

Growing up, I was bullied for being Chinese. But then I attended UC Berkeley, lived in San Francisco, and moved to work in Hong Kong before coming to Syracuse. Call it forgetful ignorance, call it acclimatized logic; either way, racial discrimination was so far from my mind, I honestly had no idea how to react to the snap judgments others. But what I did observe was that this peculiar trait was not limited to Florentines. In Pisa, a man stopped me on the bridge over the Arno, just to say, “Ko-ni-chi-wa!” before walking off. In Naples, the cashier of a caffè rejected my answer that I was from the U.S. when he asked where we were from. Instead, he put his arm around me and pronounced, “Lei è dalla Cine!” She is from China. The climax, fittingly, was at the summit of Mount Vesuvius. The winds were whipping us relentlessly, the sand and dirt stinging and flying in our eyes and mouths, heads bundled in jackets and scarves like babushkas. But the final station was just beyond our reach! I heard a man yelling excitedly. I saw him gesturing and waving his arms. “He’s congratulating us!” I thought. Then I heard, “Ciao! Ciao ragazza! Tu sei giapponese?!” After trying to convince him I’m American, I finally lied, saying I was from China. He looked and sounded devastated. “... Cine...?...?... non giapponese?” “Non... mi dispiace, ma io non sono giapponese.”

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I do not pretend to be an expert in Italian culture after only three months in Florence. But these constant callouts in Japanese and Chinese have challenged my stereotypes of Italian life. I love Italy with all my heart. I truly treasure every small memory. It has been more than I expected. The expected being: the delicious food, the smart fashion, and the gorgeous architecture. The *more*, has manifested into a very personal form of humble observation. No, I do not look Italian. And apparently, I do not look like an American. The significance here, lies in that Italians have taken to pointing out to me that I do not fit in. The vocalization of my different look is what surprised me. It is this probing sort of curiosity towards all-that-is-abnormal that I find relevant.

Florence appears to be frozen in time, poetic but double-edged as it restricts all architecture that does not resemble Renaissance or Medieval. It all must fit in. It must look as expected. If it does not, it is questioned. It is vocalized. But this does not mean that Italy is not changing. Amidst the politics, the strikes, twice of which I was temporarily stranded in other cities, we have witnessed the resignation of Berlusconi with the passing of economic reviving measures. And to the architecture, I have found that just beyond these beige walls, the pale olive-green shutters, and below the red, terracotta roofs, are interiors of great diversity. For one, the Ethic shop features quite a contemporary gallery-like layout. And the rate of Ikea furniture percolating through the traditional 16<sup>th</sup> century exterior of residences can only be guessed.

What others call “racist” callouts and conversations, I find to be my wakeup call amidst this beautiful romance of *Firenze*. We still live in a world that debates about what should stay the same, and what is allowed to change. We are quick to pick up on differences, but slow to understand that every person has a background that may not be what first appears, whether it is assuming that this Renaissance city cannot be contemporary, or that a Chinese girl cannot be American. These last three months have shown me, the Italian’s rightful pride in their culture. I have experienced their curiosity, and genuine warmth at attempts to connect and understand strangers. For that I am grateful. For this, I believe that Italy as a country, a culture, and especially as individuals, can and will find the perfect balance between the expected and unexpected.