

Envisioning Readers and Shaping Knowledge: Two Instances of Textual Intersections Between China and Italy in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract Within the construction framework of China Knowledge, a crucial role has been played by *translations* as creations of texts whose purposes clearly went beyond the transfer of meanings among different languages and cultures, thus becoming agencies in the shaping of a translingual space where Target Language and Source Language constantly interact. The process of transmission and acquisition of literary texts will be analysed here from two different kinds of approach and perspectives, represented by Mario Novaro (1868-1944), a non-sinologist who carved out the earliest Italian translation of the *Zhuangzi* (1922), and Agostino Biagi (1882-1957), a former Franciscan missionary in China whose legacy of manuscripts has recently been discovered and acclaimed, especially for his outstanding Chinese translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

Keywords Agostino Biagi. Mario Novaro. Zhuangzi. Daoism. Italy-China cultural exchange.

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1 Circulating Seeds of Knowledge

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the concept of 'spaces of circulation' as theorised by Kapil Raj (2017) and its application to the history of science field. This concept is particularly relevant to understanding the role of translation in the cultural exchange between China and Europe. Translations played a crucial role, and the theories of Kapil Raj, Schaffer, and in particular of Robert Liss (2009), provide valuable insights into how translation facilitated the movement of ideas, texts, and cultural practices between the two regions at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Translators are often seen as mediators between cultures, as they facilitate the movement of ideas and texts across linguistic boundaries. As often pointed out, translation is not a neutral process but is shaped by power relations and cultural differences and sometimes can be exploited to ascertain power imbalances between languages and cultures (Niranjana 1992, 33). Translators thus must navigate these differences and negotiate the meaning of the text in the target culture, often making significant changes to the text in the process.

In the case of China and Europe, there have been various stages of cultural exchange that can be analysed through these theoretical lenses, and it is even more evident if we look at the period within the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Such a dynamic process of circulation involved a great deal of actors moving across intersecting spaces spanning from scientific to humanistic discourses.

Narrowing the sphere to the cultural contacts between China and Italy in the early twentieth century, we have indeed many examples which can be examined through the perspectives of translations and go-betweens. One of the most notable cases is the eminent scholar Giuseppe Tucci, who made significant contributions to the study of Tibetan Buddhism and culture, introducing these subjects to a wider audience in Italy and Europe. Starting from 1925, Tucci visited Asia several times, then, in 1933, he founded the IsMEO (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente) in Rome with Giovanni Gentile, becoming the forefather of Orientalism in Italy (Crisanti 2020, 178-210).

Examining the intellectual and social landscape of China during the turn of the twentieth century, we can observe a gradual evolution in the Chinese scholars' approach to Western culture. This transformation largely benefited of their extensive reading and study of Japanese translations of Western works on history, philosophy, and literature, which began during the Meiji era in 1868. Henceforth, certain open-minded scholars who aspired for a brighter future for their country on the eve of the collapse of the imperial system, sought inspiration from Western culture and its history. The most noteworthy figures who looked at Italy as source of inspiration were Liang Qichao

梁啟超 (1873-1929) and his master Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) who travelled to Italy in 1904. Liang, after fleeing to Japan following the failure of the 1898 Wuxi Reforms, was deeply influenced by the Italian Risorgimento movement, exalting the patriotism of figures such as Mazzini, Garibaldi and Cavour, believing that China could look at them as models in the long course of transforming the country into a modern nation.¹ Both Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao played a crucial role spreading the knowledge of Italy in China.

Starting from the nineteenth century, we see an increasing number of individuals who acted as agencies in the development of sinology in Europe, particularly in Great Britain, France, and Germany. Italy saw its Golden Age thanks to the essential role and commitment of the missionaries whose works spread the knowledge of China across Europe between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. However, we have to wait for the second half of the nineteenth century to see a resurgence of interest toward Chinese studies, albeit at a comparatively slower pace than what was happening in the same period in the countries mentioned above (cf. Paternicò 2023). In this initial stage, the earliest scholars of Italian sinology (Carlo Puini, Lodovico Nocentini, Amedeo Vitale, Giovanni Vacca) displayed their interest and gave their contribution through studies and translations related to different fields, such as religion, philosophy, folklore, science, and, to a relatively lesser degree, literature. Apart from the world of those who were directly involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge in their related fields of research, we can see a gradual surge of people acting as low-profile ‘go-betweens’ sometimes working outside of their main domains, challenging the boundaries of specialisation and giving early examples of an interdisciplinary approach applied to such a peculiar space as the circulation of knowledge between China and Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The interdisciplinary nature of these early efforts reflects a broader tendency in the initial phases of Western engagement with Chinese thought, in a context where boundaries between disciplines remained permeable and subject to ongoing negotiation, and scholars often approached their subjects with wide-ranging intellectual curiosity. This dynamic allowed for the gradual emergence of focused studies within Chinese philosophy and religious traditions, laying the foundation for deeper investigations into specific schools of thought.

¹ Liang published in 1901 the work *Yidali Jianguo sanjie zhuan* 意大利建國三傑傳 (Biographies of the Three Founding Fathers of Italy) with the biographies of Mazzini, Garibaldi and Cavour, and, in 1902, he wrote the opera *Xin Luoma* 新羅馬 (New Rome) based on the historical events of the above characters. About Liang Qichao and Italy, cf. Masini, Bertuccioli 1996, 308-14; Masini 2012, 53-67. Cf. also Tang 1996, 88-102. On Kang Youwei and Italy, cf. Turriziani 2017, 217-32.

Within this evolving framework, the study of Daoism in the West began to take shape as a distinct field of inquiry. Unlike Confucianism, which had long been examined through its moral and political dimensions, Daoist thought – sometimes perceived as more elusive or esoteric – presented particular challenges to early European scholars. Their endeavours to interpret Daoist texts were shaped by prevailing intellectual paradigms, including Orientalist discourses, comparative philosophical methodologies, and theological debates.

2 ***Zhuangzi* and the Spirit of Poetry**

Scholarly interest toward Daoism started quite early during the initial stage of the development of sinology in Europe. However, it has been observed that this fascination was principally directed towards the *Daodejing* 道德經 (The Classic of the Way and Virtue) (which became the most extensively translated Chinese text in the following years) and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, thereby leaving little room for the vast array of other works belonging to the Daoist canon (cf. Komjathy 2004). This was part of the phenomenon Girardot called the “Victorian invention of Taoism” where the eminent missionary James Legge acted as primary agent staging a “Taoist tradition” in the West, a “reified entity located ‘classically’, ‘essentially’, ‘purely’ and ‘philosophically’ within certain ancient texts or ‘sacred books’ – or, more accurately, within a single enigmatic ‘classical’ text or Taoist ‘bible’ known as the Tao Te Ching” (Girardot 1999, 108-9). Following James Legge’s translations of both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* under the rather self-explanatory titling *The Sacred Books of China* as part of Max Mueller’s series *Sacred Books of the East*, other translators followed suit, prioritising the former and, to a lesser extent, the latter.

In the context of Italian sinology, interest in Daoism came quite late, mainly from the pen of Carlo Puini who, during the latter part of his career, displayed some curiosity toward Daoist thought, alongside with Buddhism which has been his principal focus in his earlier years. The first Italian translation of the *Daodejing* appeared in 1905 by Guglielmo Evans with the title *Laotse. Il libro della via e della virtù*, published by Fratelli Bocca. Evans was not a sinologist, and his work was likely a translation based on Stanislas Julien’s French translation. The very first translation from Chinese was released by the sinologist Alberto Castellani (1884-1932) in 1927, titled *La regola celeste di Lao-Tse (Tao Tê Ching)*.

On the other side, the *Zhuangzi* has been almost completely overlooked: an earlier appearance of a few excerpts of the *Zhuangzi* appeared in 1907 on the literary magazine *Leonardo* through Giovanni Vacca’s translations. Then, the *Zhuangzi* is quoted in some passages within the historical outline of Daoism made by Puini (1919) in his

Taoismo (filosofia e religione). The first attempt to a more comprehensive translation of the work will come to light in 1922 under the title *Acque d'Autunno* by Mario Novaro. Followed by other three amended and expanded editions, Novaro's translation remained for decades the only Italian reference for *Zhuangzi*'s writings, until Fausto Tomassini made his own translation, included in the volume *Testi Taoisti*, published in 1977 by UTET, then a few others followed thereafter.

Mario Novaro was not a sinologist; it could be said that he was completely detached from the (at that time comparatively small) sphere of Italian sinology. Today, Novaro is remembered as a philosopher, a poet and indeed as a successful entrepreneur in the olive oil business from the Ligurian town of Oneglia.

Novaro's educational background can be tracked to his formative years at the University of Berlin, where he underwent philosophical studies and wrote his thesis *Die Philosophie des Nicolaus Malebranche* (1893) followed by the publication of a short essay, *Il concetto di infinito e il problema cosmologico* (1895). During the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, he returned to his homeland and gradually took control of the family business Olio Sasso. In 1899, he began supervising the contents of a promotional leaflet, known as *La Riviera Ligure di Ponente*, which was regularly delivered together with the olive oil cans. Initially directed by his brother Angiolo Silvio, he transformed the leaflet into one of the most significant literary magazines of that time, making Novaro one of the most influential figures in the literary world of the early twentieth century, encouraging the publication of works by famous and soon-to-be famous authors such as Giovanni Pascoli, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Giovanni Papini, Umberto Saba, Eugenio Montale, Camillo Sbarbaro and many others.

The monotony of his early years as businessman was clearly tempered by the management of the leaflet, then renamed *La Riviera Ligure*, which will become, as he often said, a purpose for his sensitivity and his fulfilment. This constant overexposure to literature, and in particular to the many poetry works published in his turned-out-to-be literary magazine, had a strong influence on him, and in 1902 he himself started writing poetry texts, later returning to philosophical studies, his former field of interest. However, poetry writing was just an early attempt followed by a few years of silence. It was a fortuitous event which brought him back to the publication of a philosophical nature: in November 1909, his friend Giovanni Papini wrote to him that he found a copy of his thesis on Malebranche on a bookstall in Florence. Naturally, Papini was unaware of Novaro's recent 'awakening' and probably of the philosophical interests of the director of the *Riviera Ligure*, too, therefore immediately asked him to compile a little book on Malebranche or a "choice of thoughts and fragments", for the philosophical series *Cultura dell'anima* which he created that

year with the publisher Rocco Carabba in Lanciano (Novaro 2022, XIV-XV).² After some hesitations, Novaro accepted the task and, in the very same period, gradually returned to writing, combining philosophical stance within lyrical poems, published on his literary magazine first, then collected in the volume *Murmuri ed echi*, whose first edition is dated 1911.

It is not clear precisely when and how Novaro came up to Zhuangzi; however, there are some hints that could help to identify the epoch and the increasing pervasiveness of Zhuangzi's readings in Novaro's life and production.

Recently, Ricca (2012) suggested that a possible early contact with the Chinese thought might be related to a short pamphlet Nicolaus Malebranche published in 1708, titled *Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien et d'un philosophe chinois sur l'existence et la nature de Dieu*.³ By his own admission, Malebranche had always held this text in low regard (in fact, he initially attempted to prevent its publication). It was created on the explicit request of Bishop Artus de Lionne (1655-1713), apostolic vicar in China from 1689 to 1703. Malebranche's familiarity with Chinese thought was limited to what was conveyed to him by de Lionne, and as such, the Chinese philosopher depicted in his writing is a fleeting and indeterminate figure, providing only meagre insights and lacking any notable cultural or historical context. From this perspective, it would be hard to relate this Chinese philosopher to Zhuangzi, as he could have been assigned any other geo-cultural attribution; Malebranche's essential point was to create a figure that represented 'the voice of impiety', which in his own text is synonymous with 'Spinozism', that is, the obliteration of the existence of God whenever it is identified with a principle immanent to nature. This led Pierre Bayle to establish a correspondence between Spinozism and the supposed atheism of the Chinese (Malebranche 2000, 27-8). Therefore, beside the inevitable and inherent inconsistencies in Malebranche's text, the Chinese philosopher seems to have very little (if any) in common with Zhuangzi, whose language relativism would have constituted a far more difficult antagonist for the Christian philosopher. In addition, it should be pointed out that Novaro never quoted this work in his early thesis on Malebranche. Consequently, if he really could have known or read this text, it should

² Unless explicitly indicated, all the translations of Italian excerpts into English are made by the Author of this article.

³ The *Entretien* represents Malebranche's stance in the well-known controversy on the Chinese rites that inflamed Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century. The evangelical work of the Jesuits in China was accused of excessive concessions towards Confucian rites, and following the denunciations of other religious orders, it led to the condemnation of such ceremonies and the Jesuits themselves by Pope Clement XI in 1704.

have been dated to a later time, most likely to the years when Papini asked him to write the *Malebranche* book, published in 1911.

From the collected letters between Novaro and Papini, it is known that, in 1917 and 1921, the latter was informed by the former regarding the comfort derived from reading the *Zhuangzi* over an extended period, specifying that it has been “my family companion for about fifteen years” and that “it was an article by [Herbert] Giles in an English magazine which first introduced me to C. [Zhuangzi]” (Novaro, Papini 2002, 195 [14 February 1921]). It is not clear which magazine Novaro refers to and whether it is temporally related to the previous statement. It is possible that the discovery of Zhuangzi’s work was not solely a result of the article by Herbert Giles, but may also have been indirectly influenced by Giles’ *A History of Chinese Literature*, published in 1901; this volume, available in Novaro’s private library with his own annotations,⁴ contains a chapter on Daoism which provides an introduction to the main figures, with Zhuangzi being the primary focus of the section. Novaro already manifested his interest in Chinese thought and literature as early as 1911, explicitly citing the Dao in his poem *Murmuri ed echi*, then in some later-added verses to the poem *Filza* in which he quotes the poet Li Bai [as Litaipò]. The influence of the Daoist thought can be intercepted also in other poems in which the voice of the poet seems to establish a sort of intertextual dialogue with Zhuangzi’s lyrical prose.

The fondness for the *Zhuangzi* was not merely a result of scholarly interest, as evidenced by the widespread acceptance of Daoist thought even at the domestic level. This is further demonstrated in a letter from his son, which indicates that an initiation into the Dao was even integral to children’s education (cf. Boero 1988, 120). While the approach to Chinese thought can be traced to around 1905 or shortly thereafter, it was in the mid-1910s that Zhuangzi’s philosophy began to pervade Novaro’s life and poetics.

It is worth noting that the acquaintance of Novaro with the work of Zhuangzi was not an isolated event, as his friend Papini was already familiar with the text by 1907. In fact, Papini had requested the Genoese sinologist and mathematician Giovanni Vacca to translate certain excerpts from the *Zhuangzi* (namely chapters VIII “Double

⁴ Novaro’s private library, as well as many other materials related to him, is today preserved at the Fondazione Mario Novaro in Genoa. In regard to the reference to Giles’ article on the *Zhuangzi*, it should be noted that one of his most extensive texts on this topic was published on *The China Review* as “Mr. Balfour’s Chuang Tsze” (1882), a very critical revision of Balfour’s translation where Giles mostly displays Balfour’s errors and misinterpretation of the original text, offering his own correct rendering as parallel text. Even if *The China Review* was not part of Novaro’s former private library, the possibility that Novaro could have read Giles’ article during his earlier philosophical studies cannot be ruled out.

Thumb", IX "The Horse's Hooves" and X "Ransacked chests") which were published in the February 1907 issue of the already quoted magazine *Leonardo*, along with a brief introduction.⁵ It is interesting to observe that while Novaro never mentions Vacca in his letters to Papini, it was Papini who informed him of the Daoist presence in *Leonardo*. Papini himself dedicated a short essay to Zhuangzi in his volume *Testimonianze*, first published in 1918.⁶

At the beginning of 1921, it was Novaro who suggested that Papini publish a selection of texts from the *Zhuangzi* within the series *Cultura dell'anima*, edited by Papini at the publisher Rocco Carabba between 1908 and 1921. As early as spring of 1921, Novaro sent Papini his own selection from the *Zhuangzi* which would be published by Carabba in October 1922 under the title *Acque d'autunno* (Autumn Waters). Since then, three more editions would follow with a selection of texts, a preface and an explanatory note gradually expanded: April 1939 (Carabba), July 1943 (Istituto Grafico Tiberino), 1949 (Laterza; posthumous edition). The explanatory note is particularly significant as it provides us with numerous details about the *intento operis*, the methodology adopted as well as a critical analysis of the sources used. Being "ignaro del cinese" (ignorant of the Chinese language), Novaro claims to have made his selection of passages by "raffrontandole minutamente" (minutely comparing) the translations of three eminent sinologists: James Legge, Herbert Giles and Richard Wilhelm.⁷ The latest, most extensive, edition of *Acque d'autunno* includes a selection of 157 sections taken from the whole *Zhuangzi*, omitting (without giving any reason) chapters 9, 15, 16, 30 and 33. The selection follows the progression of the Chinese text; however, the specific chapters are not indicated, except in the second and third editions. Furthermore, the author adds a title to each section (similarly to the approach taken by Martin Buber and Richard Wilhelm). This may have been done to address potential issues with the original subdivision or to narrow the focus of each section to the content suggested by the titles. Despite lacking the necessary expertise to directly assess the original text, Novaro's comparative examination

⁵ An early reference to the *Zhuangzi* can be seen in a letter Vacca sent to Papini (8 December 1906) clearly hinting to the imminent publication of some selected excerpts in *Leonardo*. It looks like Vacca formerly (shortly before leaving Italy for his one-and-a-half-year travel in China) planned a more comprehensive selection from the *Zhuangzi* (as seen from further references in other letters from Papini on 29 May 1909 and 24 January 1915) but eventually did not succeed, likely diverted by other sources of interest and research. I am grateful to prof. Andrea Bréard for providing Vacca's references.

⁶ Cf. "Ciuang-tse" in Papini 1924, 219-38.

⁷ Actually since Giles' translation was then out of print, Novaro used the volume *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-Tse*, a selection of passages from the *Zhuangzi* made by the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber who (according to a claim by Wilhelm mentioned by Novaro himself) translated Giles' English version into German.

of various translations has facilitated a comprehension of both the deep meaning of the Daoist message conveyed by the *Zhuangzi* and the underlying lyrical inclination, coupled with a linguistic fluency that blends literal and metaphorical meanings in a manner that encompasses at times acerbic sarcasm and paradoxical situations. He expresses this concept rather clearly:

Gruber [*sic!*] already said, regarding the existing versions of the *Daodejing*: “The most reliable knowledge of the language is not enough, but a congenial thought is necessary, which enables the translator to instinctively feel the author’s thought and follow it by anticipating it”. And, I will add, since we are dealing with pure works of poetry, such as the *Daodejing*, and especially our *Nahua zhenjing*, or rather these *Autumn Waters*, a spirit of poetry is also needed. (But is this spirit of poetry in the translator? The reader will evaluate.)⁸

In Novaro’s version, there are no explanatory notes in the text, but only a reference to related conceptual references, found in the Gospels, Dante, Goethe, and other authors. In fact, the tendency to indicate philosophical intersections and intertextuality with the Western cultural tradition is a recurring element of the approach that Novaro already presents in the introduction of his work, with recurring (however rarely explicitly referred to) paraphrases or quotations from the *Daodejing*. Here, the constant meticulousness in indicating affinities related to the history of Western thought and literature is animated by the desire not only to make the profound meaning of a text made notoriously complex by its anti-rationalism more accessible to the neophyte, but also to ‘brighten’ (*lumeggiare*) the spiritual universe from which it took shape.

3 ‘We Are’, and Let that Be Enough for Us

As already mentioned above, the *Zhuangzi* did not have the same fate as the *Daodejing*, which was translated into many languages with

⁸ “Diceva già il Gruber, a proposito delle esistenti versioni del Taoteching: ‘la più sicura conoscenza della lingua non basta, ma occorre un pensiero congeniale, che metta in grado il traduttore di risentire istintivamente il pensiero dell’autore, e quasi presentendo seguirlo’. E, io aggiungerò, trattandosi di opere pure di poesia, quali il Taoteching, e specialmente il nostro Nanhua Cenching, ossia queste *Acque d’autunno*, occorre anche uno spirito di poesia. (Ma è questo spirito di poesia nel traduttore? Giudicherà il lettore.)” (Novaro 1949, 28 fn. 1). The titles in the original are modified in the translation according to today’s standard *pinyin* transcription. Quite oddly, in the whole explanatory note and introduction, the German sinologist Wilhelm Grube is always misprinted as Gruber.

countless editions. Within the Italian context, Novaro's *Acque d'autunno* remained the unique reference until Fausto Tomassini made his own translation from the Chinese text in 1977. However, after Tomassini's effort releasing the earliest translation from the original language, very few attempts followed: in 1982, a new *Zhuang-zi* [Chuang-tzu] by Carlo Laurenti and Christine Leverd appeared for the publishing house Adelphi Edizioni. They actually translated the French edition previously published by Liou Kia-Hway. Then, in 2008, Leonardo Vittorio Arena edited his translation for RCS Libri (later reprinted by BUR Rizzoli), and in 2012, Augusto Shantena Sabbadini made his own translation for Apogeo, part of the Feltrinelli publishing group, then reprinted it for the *Universale Economica* series (2017) by the same publisher. The translators of the latter two versions explicitly claim to have translated directly from the Chinese text. Furthermore, in 1994, Luni Editrice published the whole translation of Léon Wiegier's *Les Pères du Système Taoïste* including the *Zhuangzi* (as *Nan-hoà-cienn Ching* [Nanhua zhenjing]) in the third volume, reissued as a single book (*L'opera di Chuang Tzu*) in 2011.

Beside all the above, an unknown translation of the whole *Zhuang-zi* appeared among the manuscripts left by Agostino Biagi (1882-1957) to his descendant and discovered after more than half a century by his great-granddaughter Mara Carocci in 2021. Soon after the discovery, Biagi's manuscript legacy made quite a sensation as it included, among others, the full Chinese translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia* in four versions, using different poetic meters. Before this event, the figure of Agostino Biagi was totally unknown in the world of Italian sinology.

Biagi was born in Fossato, a small village on a mountain ridge north of Pistoia, in the very heart of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines. He spent most of his earlier years in a modest environment, soon facing the difficulties of helping the family to earn its living, as childhood did not last long in those times and places (Carocci 2022, 13). He always displayed an excellent aptitude for studying, then, at twelve, he was admitted in the convent of the Collegio Serafico in Galceti, near Prato. In 1898, at sixteen, he started exercising his duties as a cleric in the convent of Giaccherino, then beginning the novitiate in Cortona. This is a crucial year because, according to his own statement, Biagi had his first acquaintance with two Chinese fellows who were studying with him in the convent and from whom he started his initial learning of the Chinese language that lasted around three years.⁹ In 1902, he left

⁹ Starting from 1887, the convent admitted the first two novices from the Hubei province: Francesco Fung (Feng Luhan 馮陸漢, 1862-1924) and Bonaventura Zeng Guoxian 曾國賢 (1864-1931). Both were ordered priests in 1891 and returned to China two years later, serving the diocese of Laohekou 老河口, Hubei 湖北. Zeng was beheaded by the communists in 1931 during some riots in the area. In 1894, two other novices arrived

Italy for the Franciscan mission in China, following father Cipriano Silvestri to the Hubei province, settling in Laohekou for acquiring the essential education about both local language and customs, then he devoted himself to missionary work in mountain areas north of the Yunxi township, in north-west Hubei. However, after a few years he returned to Italy: it is not exactly clear when this happened, quite likely in the second half of 1907.¹⁰ Even the reason of his sudden leave is shrouded in mystery: the official record mentions health issues, but there are indications suggesting a possible disagreement with the mission's administration, which appeared to be too compliant with those in power in the local area and not sufficiently protective of the interests of the poor. After returning to Italy, he spent several years in the convents of Galceti, San Bonaventura and Piombino. While in Piombino, in early 1919, he had a serious confrontation with monsignor Eugenio Pacelli (later known as Pope Pius XII) who sworn not to give him any chance to return to China. This confrontation had a crucial impact on him, to the point that soon thereafter he chose apostasy, leaving the Franciscan Church and becoming a Baptist pastor for the American Baptist mission in Italy. This life-changing resolution would lead him and his future wife Sofia around the country for pastoral activities: first in Sicily, then in Avellino during the 1920s and lastly in Genoa. During these decades, Biagi had increased contacts with communist and anti-fascist associates, thus becoming a marked target filed by the police, and kept under surveillance by the prefectures. He settled in Genoa in the 1930s, however living those years almost constantly in conditions of poverty and destitution, also due to the serious economic difficulties of the mission. In 1942, his name was cleared from the subversive allegations of the past years, following an apparent "repentance" (Carocci 2022, 95); however, he still secretly kept contacts with some local partisans. Nevertheless, with his name finally cleared, he could pursue a job opportunity as lecturer of Chinese language for the Genoa and Turin branches of the IsMEO, thanks to the endorsement of Giuseppe Tucci himself, who also commended his *Grammatica della Lingua Chinese Ufficiale* (Official Grammar of the Chinese Language), an unpublished

from Hubei: Odorico Cheng Hede 成和德 (1873-1928) and Antonio Huang Fangji 黄方济 (1872-1898). Odorico Cheng, after being ordered as priest in 1900, returned and served in his hometown Laohekou, from 1903. Later, in 1922, he became bishop of the diocese of the Puqi 蒲圻 township, today known as Chibi 赤壁, Hubei 湖北. Antonio Huang died of typhus fever in Italy, soon after becoming priest. Cf. Bensi 2001, 100. Cf. also Zavarella 2000, 125; Van Damme 1978, 77-8, 95, 171, 193. I am grateful to Dr. Raissa Degruttola for her help finding this information.

10 There are incongruences regarding Biagi's stay in China: in his private letters he once wrote eight years, but another one says ten. According to the archive of the O.F.M., he stayed for five years; this information matches with a statement by Fr. Sebastiano Ceccherelli who said he replaced Biagi after his "sudden and unexpected leave" during the autumn of 1907. Cf. Ceccherelli 1964, 57.

typewritten work Biagi previously compiled and used in his courses, now preserved together with his extant manuscripts at the Accademia della Crusca in Florence. The appointment as IsMEO's lecturer probably represents the greatest achievement and the late acknowledgment of the expertise he acquired in decades of studies, despite all the hardship he had to endure during his life. Unfortunately, it did not last long: since the end of 1942, the continuous bombings on the cities of northern Italy caused large destruction. Just a few months after, his lessons in Turin were interrupted due to damages to the university building where the course was held. In Genoa, he continued to teach until 1944, but after the arrival of the Allies, the IsMEO suspended all activities. Throughout this period, Biagi faced even greater difficulties, and the harsh economic conditions of the mission compounded the challenges. After the end of World War II, the situation did not improve; his financial difficulties and the progressive onset of Parkinson's disease would once again put him to the test in a situation of physical debilitation that required long hospitalisation and costly medical expenses. It was in this difficult condition that he considered the possibility of publishing his translation of the *Divina Commedia* to see the effort of a lifetime rewarded and to obtain some economic support. He also tried to sell it to the American Baptist Mission, but all ended without success. In the following years, due to the worsening and chronic nature of his illness, there were no more significant events. The family's burdens now fell entirely on his wife Sofia, who made great efforts to meet all his needs until his death in 1957.

Apart from the family correspondence, there is very scarce information about Biagi's personal life and network of acquaintances. He did not leave any diary or memoir, apart from a handwritten short biographical sketch in Chinese, most likely written in his last years (Carrocci 2022, 211-14). Therefore, at present, it is quite hard to draw the path of his significant output and to delineate the genesis of such varied production. According to his wife Sofia, the translation of the *Divina Commedia* was his lifelong commitment, started as early as during his stay in China. In the general lack of temporal indications, Biagi's interest toward the classics of the Chinese thought and literature can be traced back to the same epoch, while his Italian translations probably were completed in the following decades, starting from the 1920s.¹¹

The cover page of his *Zhuangzi* translation states: 莊子周 // *T'Chuan-ze Çou* // *Traduzione testuale di A. Biagi, 1921*. The indication of the year is quite misleading: in the preface, Biagi refers to the sinologist Alberto Castellani as the "lamented professor" (who actually

¹¹ His translations of some of Pu Songling's short stories appeared on the magazine *L'Irpinia* in 1929(?) and were later collected by Bertuccioli. Cf. <https://www.ortical-ab.it/Irpinia-Rassegna-di-cultura-l-avamposto>.

passed away in 1932); consequently, the preface, if not the completion of the entire work, should be postdated. Biagi's *Zhuangzi* is indeed the translation of the whole text with all its 33 chapters; therefore, it should be considered the earliest complete translation in Italian. The translation is introduced by a short preface, the bibliography, and an added explanatory page on phonetic transcriptions with a couple of suggested readings. The bibliographical references, shown below as in the manuscript, are not in alphabetical order, so it is possible to hypothesise that the author may have listed them according to a supposed order of importance:

- Alberto Castellani, *La regola celeste*, Sansoni. Firenze. [1927]¹²
- Alberto Castellani, *La dottrina del Tao*. Zanichelli. Bologna. [1927]
- Carlo Puini, *Il Tao. [Taoismo. Filosofia e religione]*. Lanciano. Carabba. [1917]
- Léon Wiegier, *Les pères du Taoisme. Rudiments. [Les pères du système taoïste]*. Ho-kien. [1913]
- Herbert Giles, *Tchuang-ze [Chuang-Tzu: Taoist Philosopher and Chinese Mystic]*. London. [Bernard Quaritch. 1889]
- Wilhelm Grube, *Geschichte der Chinesischen Literatur*. Leipzig. [C.F. Amelang. 1909]
- Tc'eng Pi-Kin [?], *Ricerche sulla filosofia laoziana*. [?]
- Wang sien-cien [Wang xianqian 王先謙 1842-1917], *Commentario al Tchuang-ze. [Zhuangzi jijie 莊子集解]*. 1909]
- Zhai Yuen-phei [Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 1868-1940], *Storia della letteratura cinese. [Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi daolun ji 中國新文學大系導論集]*. 1940]
- Hu Sce-cy [Hu Shi 胡適 1891-1962], *Storia della letteratura cinese. [Zhongguo wenxue shixuan li 中國文學史選例]*. 1931]
- San Phu-teng [?], *Storia della cultura cinese*. Sciang-hai [?]
- James Legge, *[The Sacred Books of the East.] The Texts of Taoism*. Oxford. 1891.

Quite interestingly, in the bibliography, Biagi only refers to the translations by Legge, Giles and Wiegier; there's no indication of the other available translations, like the ones by C. de Harlez's (1891) and Richard Wilhelm (1920). Biagi's preface is by far the shortest if compared with those included in the published works above. Biagi's prose is very terse, going straight to some focal concepts of Zhuangzi, whom he calls in the preface's title "the agrestic philosopher" (*il filosofo agreste*). The argumentative discourse of the preface proceeds with some linguistic roughness, which suggests a certain lack of agility in presenting the

¹² I completed these references with additional or amended information within square brackets. When unavailable, question marks were added.

main concepts found in the volume, which he summarised as: “world view” (*visuale del mondo*); “men’s perspective” (*visuale dell’uomo*); “society’s perspective” (*visuale della società*). Differently from the other authors mentioned above and even from Novaro, in his concise presentation, Biagi does not show the same enthusiasm for comparison, limiting himself to a couple of examples that actually reflect his specific religious education. For this reason, the perhaps excessively concise nature of the preface can be explained by the fact that Biagi himself did not have a proper philosophical education, but rather one mainly based on the school studies he had in the convents of Galceti and Giacherino. For instance, while explaining the Daoist world view, he states:

Zhuangzi replaces the ‘reality’ of every being with the Only Real Entity creating the ‘material’ phenomenon, while the Tao is the ‘nothing of the nothing of the nothing’ of every reality, both material and spiritual; it is the Truth. It even surpasses the Rosminian aphorism ‘The Entity creates the existing’ and, approaching the idea of God of St. Augustine, it embraces the concept of the divinity of biblical philosophy: ‘God is ‘He who is’’, He is the truth in itself and in all things.¹³

The comparison with the philosophy of Antonio Rosmini and St. Augustine is rather daring, but it clearly reveals the conceptual references in the interpretation put forward by Biagi.¹⁴ Moreover, in the

13 “Zhuangzi, all’Unico ente reale creante il fenomeno ‘materia’, sostituisce la ‘realtà’ di ogni essere, mentre il Tao è il ‘nulla del nulla del nulla’ di ogni realtà, materiale e spirituale; è la Verità. Sorpassa anche l’aforisma Rosminiano ‘L’Ente crea l’esistente’ e accostandosi all’idea di Dio di S. Agostino, fa suo il concetto della divinità della filosofia biblica: ‘Dio è ‘colui che è’’, è la verità in sé e in tutte le cose”. Cf. Firenze, Accademia della Crusca, Fondo Biagi, 莊子周 // *TÇuan-ze Çou* // Traduzione testuale di A. Biagi, 1921, 1.

14 It should be noted that a reference to St Augustine appears in an early intersectionality between the theoretical framework of Daoism and Western philosophy proposed by Julius Evola in his controversial rendering of the *Daodejing* (1923) while in the introduction he says: “appartenente al Tao l’immobile, l’innominabile, come appartenente anche al divenire e l’immobile mutevole, ossia il decorso ciclico. Così è esplicitato come l’innominabile sia contenuto nel nominabile attraverso la legge ciclica che vien chiamata nel testo (XXI) la forma fenomenica, il modo della Via: il Tao del Tao (XL). Questa stessa teoria, sviluppata sì ma in nulla alterata nella sua essenza, noi la ritroveremo nei neoplatonici (in Proclo specialmente), Scoto Eriugena, in Eckhart, nella dottrina cristiana dell’origine eterna del tempo di cui è traccia già in Agostino e via via sino a Schelling e Hegel” (belonging to the Tao is the immobile, the unnameable, but also the becoming and the mutable immobility – that is, the cyclical flow. It is thus made explicit how the unnameable is contained within the nameable through the cyclical law, which in the text (XXI) is referred to as the phenomenal form, the mode of the Way: the Tao of the Tao (XL). This same theory – developed but in no way altered in its essence – we will find again among the Neoplatonists (especially in Proclus), in Scotus Eriugena, in Eckhart, in the Christian doctrine of the eternal origin of time, of which traces are already found in Augustine, and subsequently in Schelling and Hegel). Cf. Evola 2008, 31.

section on 'men's perspective', it is remarkable to underline the perception of Zhuangzi's skepticism, already pointed out by earlier Western scholars. Biagi here explains:

Zhuangzi's skepticism is focused on the correspondence of our concepts and mental categories to the reality of things and the truth of the Dao. [...] We do not know whether we are ourselves or others, as our consciousness of our personality is nothing more than relative and contingent. 'We are', and let that be enough for us.¹⁵

Novaro, while musing on the same topic, observes:

Mixed with Zhuangzi's mysticism is a dose of skepticism. However, it is an apparent and secondary skepticism, and impersonal. As if it were about the human heart and not his own, since he has conquered or conquers it, and only expresses it because there is no one who does not experience it. In truth, the foundation of his thought is absolute certainty and faith: with what is not doubtful, he dissolves doubt until liberation from all doubt. In the Tao, he finds an unshakable pivot of unity, faith, and hope.¹⁶

In these two passages, there is a clear similarity between the two authors, but Biagi seems to benefit from his own concision. While approaching the thought of Zhuangzi, both develop different paths: while Biagi seems to progressively withdraw, Novaro is driven by an impatience to explain the contents that sometimes border on considerable verbosity. Perhaps Biagi, recognising Zhuangzi's expressive concision, has adapted his preface to this need, letting his translation speak more than any conceptual paraphrase.

4 Envisioning Readers and Translations' Production

Mario Novaro and Agostino Biagi operated in a more understated yet significant capacity as intermediaries in the dissemination of

15 "Lo scetticismo di Zhuangzi versa piuttosto sulla rispondenza delle nostre concezioni e categorie mentali alla realtà delle cose e alla verità del Tao. [...] Non sappiamo se noi siamo noi o se siamo altri, essendo la coscienza nostra della nostra personalità nulla altro che relativa e contingente. 'Siamo', e tanto ci basti". Cf. Firenze, Accademia della Crusca, Fondo Biagi, 莊子周 // *TÇuan-ze Çou* // *Traduzione testuale di A. Biagi, 1921, 2.*

16 "[M]escolato al misticismo di Zhuangzi è una dose di scetticismo: è però uno scetticismo apparente e secondario, e impersonale: come a dire del cuore umano e non suo proprio: poi che egli l'ha vinto o vince, e solo lo espone perché non v'è chi non lo sperimenti. In verità il fondo del suo pensiero è assoluta certezza e fede: con ciò che non è dubbio scioglie il dubbio fino alla liberazione da ogni dubbio: nel Tao trova un perno incrollabile di unità fede speranza" (Novaro 1949, 22).

knowledge, subtly contributing to the broader landscape of cultural production in the early twentieth century; their effort in making the *Zhuangzi* available to Italian readers shows the potential of a translation as 'go-between' in the complexity of cultural exchanges through the explication and the revelation of a founding work of the Daoist tradition. However, the course and the outcome of their efforts had been very different. Novaro was an outsider who felt the fascination of Zhuangzi's thought and tried to make up for the shortcomings of "lazy and distracted sinologists", who, as his friend Papini defined them (1924, 223), "do not like to translate".

Novaro was a philosopher or, as the Nobel prize poet laureate Eugenio Montale called him, a 'poet-philosopher', not a sinologist, and (differently than Papini) he did not have any contact with the major figures of the Italian sinology of the time. While not in the network of the sinology world, Novaro indeed made extensive use of the corpus of translations available, displaying an overtly critical approach that can be seen in his methodical reading of those earlier 'go-betweens', never short of detailed comments on them. Novaro's effort should not be overlooked as the 'translator of Zhuangzi's translators':¹⁷ as the scholar Viviana Masia recently pointed out, the translator

should make the effort to evaluate the extent to which the receiver shares the common ground underlying the text to be translated. (2021, 130)

Novaro was keenly aware of the importance of this concept while capturing the essence of Zhuangzi's message, and his criticism of earlier translators centred on their inability to convey this message effectively to readers. Novaro believed that these earlier translations had different deficiencies in capturing the true meaning of the text, often failing to transfer the nuances and subtleties of Zhuangzi's notions. About Legge's work, he states his mind

was too narrowly Anglican, but his scrupulous fidelity means that he puts in parentheses the additions he adds to the text to make it, in his judgment, clearer, so that it sometimes becomes easier, with their suppression, to guess the true meaning of the original.¹⁸

¹⁷ I paraphrased the famous statement 'translator of Homer's translators' (*traduttore dei traduttori d'Omero*) by Ugo Foscolo, referring to his claim that Vincenzo Monti translated Homer's *Iliad* without having any knowledge of Greek.

¹⁸ "La mente del Legge era troppo ristrettamente anglicana. Ma la sua fedeltà scrupolosa fa sì che egli metta tra parentesi le aggiunte che egli appone al testo per renderlo a suo giudizio più perspicuo; cosicchè riesce qualche volta più agevole, con la soppressione di esse, indovinare il vero senso dell'originale" (Novaro 1949, 28).

De Harlez's was "loveless, tasteless, missing the comprehension" (Novaro 1949, 30). While praising Wilhelm's, Novaro yet adds that

he modernizes the original a bit too much with technical-philosophical phrasing and omits some specifically Chinese details to better adapt the text to the European usage, while taking away its genuine flavour and replacing the specific with the generic. (29)¹⁹

He believed that translating *Zhuangzi* required an affinity with the philosopher's world view (in some letters he even calls himself Mario Zhuangzi) and a sensitivity to the needs and perspectives of the Western reader. Accordingly, Novaro worked tirelessly to create a version that would be primarily faithful to the spirit of the original, not just necessarily to the text, thus being accessible and engaging to a modern audience. From this perspective, Novaro had a rather clear idea of his potential reader, consequently his choice of passages from the whole text is aimed to express the image of Zhuangzi's Daoism as an effective and valid system of thought, and not merely the description of an outdated or abstruse ideology of a distant past.²⁰ In *Acque d'autunno*, there are very few footnotes, mainly with no explanatory function; Novaro only points out conceptual affinities with the Gospel, Dante, Goethe, and other authors. In fact, the tendency to highlight intersections and intertextual philosophical influences with the Western cultural tradition is a recurring element of Novaro's approach, as already evidenced in the introduction of the work which showcases his extensive comparative expertise. He quotes plenty of names: Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Protagoras, Giordano Bruno, Shakespeare, Goethe (mentioned almost on every page), Tolstoy, to name just a few, and there are even parallels with the Indian thought of the Upanishads.²¹

19 "Il Wilhelm modernizza un po' troppo l'originale con fraseologia tecnico-filosofica, e sopprime anche qualche particolare prettamente cinese per adattare meglio il testo all'uso europeo, mentre gli toglie il suo schietto sapore, sostituendo al particolare il generico".

20 This is partly the accusation Novaro has made in his letter to Papini against Puini's book on Daoism. Puini's approach toward the history of Chinese religions and thoughts can be also perceived in his collected essays published under the self-explanatory title *La vecchia Cina* (Old China).

21 These animated comparative insights, which were quite common at the beginning of the twentieth century, were partly the result of a vision of Chinese thought (or more generally of Asian cultures) that was one of the consequences of the Jesuits' 'invention' of China, in which points of contact and similarities with aspects of Western tradition were considered elements that contributed to the legitimacy of the other culture and betrayed the implicit and supposed superiority of those who contributed to spreading knowledge about it. However, there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Novaro's intentions (which are widely expressed), whose diverse outcomes in the extensive introduction are the result of both speculations dictated by his personal

Apparently, the reception of *Acque d'autunno* was excellent, as indicated in reviews of the time,²² and more than fifteen years after the first edition, all copies were sold out. Following a series of conflicts with Papini, Novaro was able to release an amended and expanded second edition in 1939, and after breaking with Carabba, an additional third revised edition followed for the Istituto Grafico Tiberino in 1943.

Agostino Biagi's translations, on the other hand, had a completely different fate. His manuscripts, together with all his other works, remained sealed in a box for over half a century after his death, and it was only in 2021 that they were discovered by his great-granddaughter and eventually brought to light.²³

Biagi had an extremely eventful life, where his devotion to the missionary work, first as a Franciscan and then as a Baptist pastor, was accompanied by a deep fervour against the injustices suffered by the underprivileged, which he had always held dear. Therefore, his approach to anti-fascist groups and his strong stance on the events that marked his time is not surprising. In this context, he never gave up his dream of returning to China, towards which he had always felt an affection that never faded over the years; on the contrary, it may have become even stronger to the point of cultivating his passion and study of the Chinese language and culture for the rest of his life. The most evident proof is the rich production of translations he compiled over several decades, which have now emerged from oblivion.

formation and considerations drawn from the sources consulted. Therefore, it is from this perspective that one must understand, for example, the numerous references to the *Daodejing* (which he wished to re-translate, not showing particular preference for the existing Italian translation by Guglielmo Evans), to which Novaro refers in the introduction, as well as the references to Confucius, albeit filtered through the often-irreverent lens of the Daoist school.

22 The orientalist Paolo Emilio Pavolini praised *Acque d'autunno* in his review on the literary magazine *L'Italia che scrive* (1923, 107), saying: "Anche a giudizio di sinologi da me consultati, la sua versione può usarsi con piena fiducia - il che non può dirsi purtroppo di altre condotte sull'originale da chi sapeva di cinese 'quanto la punta di un pelo sul mantello di un cavallo'" (According to the sinologists I consulted, his version can be used with complete confidence - which unfortunately cannot be said of others who worked on the original and knew about Chinese 'only as much as a hair on a horse's coat'). The review does not mention the sinologists consulted by Pavolini.

23 Until the summer of 2021, Biagi's great-granddaughter Mara Carocci was in possession of only a few of the notebooks that her father had passed down to her, which contained Biagi's preparatory work for the translation of the *Divina Commedia*. It was only after her mother's death and during the process of clearing out the house in October that a box was found containing all the other manuscripts with all the translations of the *Divina Commedia*, several Italian translations of Chinese texts (*Zhuangzi* was among them) and other previously unknown materials. All materials have undergone an initial general assessment and have subsequently been examined by the author of this essay during the preparation of the present work. In relation to Biagi's translations of the *Divina Commedia*, a preliminary study has been recently published by the author in collaboration with Mara Carocci and Emanuele Banfi, released by the Accademia della Crusca (2024).

Biagi had a remarkable determination to have his knowledge and talent recognised. Already in the 1920s, while he was living near Avellino, he sought the possibility of teaching at the Regio Istituto Orientale in Naples (Carocci 2022, 92), but without success. It is difficult to know whether this negative outcome was also determined by the consequences of his anti-fascist activities, which had long been under the scrutiny of the fascist police. His personal experiences and serious economic difficulties would continue to mark him, and certainly never facilitate the possibility of asserting his skills in the appropriate context. As previously mentioned, this would only happen for a brief period in the early 1940s.

As of today, many questions about Biagi's personal life remain unanswered, as do many questions about his written works. For example, it is unclear whether he showed or shared his works with specialists in sinology, especially his translations of the *Divina Commedia*. It is also uncertain whether he had any native speakers' support in realising this enormous project and whether he showed his translations to any Chinese readers. Furthermore, it is unknown whether his translations of Chinese texts were solely intended for educational purposes or if he envisioned a wider readership, perhaps through publication. By examining Biagi's translation of the *Zhuangzi*, it may be possible to provide some answers or understand what underlies this and the other translation works he left us.

In the title, the word *testuale* (textual) is indicated in bold, which I believe should be understood as a specific connotation of the conception of his work. 'Textual' here, I believe, should be understood as an ideal adherence to the original text. Biagi certainly had the skills for this type of work and there are several elements that allow us to interpret it in this sense: he is one of the few to explicitly indicate Chinese sources in the bibliography, which allowed him to submit his work to a deeper interpretation, even comparing well-known Chinese commentaries such as Wang Qianxian's. Observing, for example, the rendering of the second chapter, *Unità delle cose* (*Qiwulun* 齊物論 'Equalising Assessment of Things'), a particular attention to the writing of the original text and to the alternation between prose and verse sections can be noted. Biagi, probably induced to this particular attention by the valuable sources consulted, is one of the few to dwell on this specific linguistic aspect that will be highlighted much later by Angus Graham. Consequently, the idea of 'textual' denotes a specific angle, perhaps more strongly linguistic than content-oriented.

The impression is that Biagi is deeply convinced that the essence of thought can be inferred and can emerge from the text itself. Although this may seem rather utopian to the Western reader approaching a work such as the *Zhuangzi*, a motivation can be detected in the same dialogic structure of most of the narrated episodes (which is

also very common in the tradition of ancient Chinese thought). It is likely that in Biagi's idea there was the confidence that an accurate textual rendering could allow the reader to independently determine the truth of the message, as Socrates did with his disciples. Therefore, it should be like a sort of *μαρτυρική* in which truth would spontaneously sprout in the reader's consciousness. Generally speaking, Biagi's prose is rather less polished than Novaro's, but the former's version of all the poetical sections is much worth of mention for a distinct lyrical elan.

As mentioned above, Biagi's introduction to the *Zhuangzi* is brief and to the point. While it is possible that it was not solely intended as an educational text, but rather as a summary of the main themes, it cannot be ruled out that there may be other reasons behind its brevity. Perhaps it cannot even be excluded that Biagi did not fully feel a total communion with the principles as they were exposed in earlier Western texts. A case that can lead to this consideration can be found in his brief explanation of the concept of *wuwei* 無為 (non-action). In fact, he quotes Castellani, stating that this concept can be better understood as 'not overdoing' (*non strafare*). And then he adds:

In its Daoistic extension, I believe that the expression 'not-action' should be understood in the individualistic causal sense, in antithesis to the Dao, which is in Man and driven by external reasons. You 'do not' for individual purposes or schemes.²⁴

Biagi then points out the opposition to the opportunistic political involvement (rather than engagement, as he labels it with the rather slanderous "*politicantismo*") of the Confucian disciples. Biagi's interpretation of *wuwei* is rather noteworthy here; his conception seems to deviate considerably from the theoretical idea of the 'non-action' as a "conscious and relaxed tendency that gives space to the natural development of situations" (Andreini, Scarpari 2007, 26), proposing instead a vision in which the practice of virtue appears admissible as an active form only when it is not driven by individualistic impulses. This would appear to be further supported by his premise in which he refers to Castellani's interpretation as 'not-overdoing', something that the latter does only in an extremely limited number of occurrences.²⁵

²⁴ "Nella sua estensione taoistica, io ritengo che essa espressione : "non agire" debba intendersi nel senso causale individualistico in antitesi del Tao che è nell'uomo, e spinti da motivi esteriori a quello. "Non agire" tu secondo fini o schemi personali, individuali". Cf. Firenze, Accademia della Crusca, Fondo Biagi, 莊子周 // *TÇuan-ze Çou* // Traduzione testuale di A. Biagi, 1921, 2-3.

²⁵ The use of the word *strafare* (overdoing) in Castellani's works on Daoism appears only within his *La Regola Celeste di Lao-Tse (Tao Te Ching)* as referred to the wrong

At this point, one cannot help but wonder what motivations could be behind such a bold and divergent interpretation by Biagi, and whether it could be related to a specific envision of his ideal reader. Biagi's life experience shows that the Word of the Gospel has always been a focal point of his world view, and being on the side of the marginalised also meant taking a strong stand in defence of their rights. This became evident since his mission in China and probably was the real reason that led to his return to Italy. This stance was further confirmed by his subsequent anti-fascist activities, which resulted in him being monitored by the police and, in 1926, being denounced and then prosecuted (although he was acquitted). Even after his surely staged 'repentance' in 1942, he apparently continued to maintain contacts with anti-fascist and partisan circles, to the point that, among his manuscripts, in addition to the Chinese translation of *The Internazionale*, there was also a translation of the partisan song of the Garibaldi Brigade Cichero, which operated on the Genoese hills between 1943 and 1945.²⁶

Therefore, political engagement and activism were clearly part of Biagi's life. Considering the implications of Biagi's world view, it becomes clear how he arrived at his particular conception of the *wuwei*. His inclination towards proselytism, in which the principles of the Gospel merged with a clear ideological orientation, did not merely contemplate the natural course of events in the world, but also envisaged the possibility of an active response to specific stimuli, a response ideally driven by collective intent. Thus, it can be inferred that Biagi's approach to the *wuwei* went beyond the acceptance of things as they were, thus actively pursuing for a better world. This was fuelled by his Christian faith and his commitment to social justice,

behaviour of the sovereign towards his subjects when he misses the 'non-action'. As explicit reference in the explanation of the concept of *wuwei*, it appears only in the comment of the sixty-fourth stanza, when he says (1954, 109): "Il Non-fare non deve essere il frutto dell'inerzia ma della nostra più perforante penetrazione [...] da contrapporsi alla fretta infeconda di chi pretende strafare la quale si fonda sempre sopra una inguaribile angustia di coscienza" (Non-action must not stem from inertia but from our most penetrating insight [...] as opposed to the barren haste of those who strive to overdo, which always arises from an incurable narrowness of consciousness). However, he never uses this expression while expounding the *wuwei* in the chapter "Il suo compito terreno" in his *La dottrina del Taoismo. Ricostruita sui testi cinesi ed esposta integralmente* (1927).

26 The song *E giustizia sarà - Il canto della Cichero* was officially published in September 1944 on the clandestine journal *Il Partigiano* that was edited by Giovanni Serbandini (1912-1999), also known as 'Bini'. In the manuscript, the Chinese translation is followed by Biagi's dedication in verses to Bini, who was among the founders of the Cichero brigade in 1943. The dedication also mentions the newspaper *L'Unità*, of which Serbandini would become the founder of the Genoese section and which he would lead from 1945 to 1958, when he will be elected as a deputy of the Italian Communist Party. Therefore, it can be deduced that the manuscript is at least from the post-1945 period. In the manuscript, Biagi refers to himself as 'old and paralysed,' which is quite evident in his unsteady handwriting. Cf. <https://www.anpi.it/biografia/giovanni-serbandini-bini>

which led him to be a vocal advocate for the rights of the marginalised and oppressed. His vision of *wuwei* and the transmission of this concept within the *Zhuangzi* was then not a withdrawal from the world, but rather an engaged and transformative way of being in it.

5 Λάθε βιώσας

The author of a modern Italian edition of *Zhuangzi* declares in the last paragraph of its preface:

To avoid sterile controversies, I allow myself one last consideration. Usually, the translator of certain works is a philologist, endowed with an excellent knowledge of the language but, unfortunately, with insufficient and sometimes non-existent philosophical background. Since certain texts cannot be without it, it seemed necessary to me to approach *Zhuangzi* from a different perspective. (Arena 2018, 47)²⁷

Apart from the trivial generalisation regarding the category of philologists, the acrimony of this statement allows us to clearly discern a divergence in the approach to a text like the *Zhuangzi* (and even more manifest with the countless versions available of the *Daodejing*), which has been evident since the early twentieth century and implicitly reveals a methodology in which any textual nonconformity is blatantly justified in terms of clarity for the reader, an *excusatio non petita* that may betray, for those more shrewd and informed, a lesser familiarity with the complexity of the core significances within the original text. And exactly here lies the clear difference between a translation aimed at the creation of a product (regardless of how successful or not) meeting the expectations of the mass' reader and one based on a deep scientific analysis.

²⁷ “Per evitare sterili polemiche mi permetto un’ultima considerazione. Di solito, il traduttore di certe opere è un filologo, dotato di un’ottima conoscenza della lingua, ma, spiace constatarlo, di una insufficiente e talvolta inesistente preparazione filosofica. Poiché certi testi non possono prescindere, mi è sembrato necessario affrontare il *Zhuangzi* in un’altra ottica”. It should be reminded that so far none of the published Italian translations of the *Zhuangzi* was written by a ‘fully fledged’ sinological philologist.

If we look at the two cases presented here, it is true that Biagi's work does not mention some earlier versions of the *Zhuangzi*, and it is also true that neither Novaro's is mentioned. The latter is even ignored, perhaps carelessly or intentionally, in a short text published on the same subject and by the same publisher shortly thereafter (Carbone 1938), and it is substantially absent from the bibliographies of more recent editions, including that of the author of the above quotation.²⁸

Both Biagi and Novaro had to undergo marginalisation, though for very different reasons. Biagi's marginalisation was fundamentally linked to contingent factors that prevented him from giving voice to his impressive work or finding fertile ground to sow the fruits of his long labour, which remained unknown for about a century but fortunately preserved and now brought to light and made available to the scientific community. His valuable contribution already denotes a modern approach to translation in which numerous elements of intertextuality emerge in his Italian renderings, and this is even more evident in his versions of the *Divina Commedia*.

On the other hand, Novaro's marginalisation is of a different kind: his publication had some success, as evidenced by subsequent reissues. However, it was a work not conducted by a specialist of the Chinese language or philosophy, but by a philosopher who, in perceiving an affinity of thought, wanted to disseminate knowledge through his own realisation. He was consciously an outsider, and so was considered his work even after his death. As a result, the contribution of Novaro must be understood and valued within the epoch in which it was produced, and above all for the reasons that led to its creation.

However, there is a common point that seems to connect such different lives as those of Biagi and Novaro. Their Italian renderings of the *Zhuangzi* were, in fact, products of particular moments in their lives, moments that could well align with the Epicurean phrase *Λάθε βιώσας*, or 'live in hidden'.²⁹ Epicurean solitude, advocating the avoidance of public attention, fame, or political involvement, considers the essence of meditative practice as an attempt to reconnect the soul and inner self with nature.

In the case of Novaro, the first edition of the *Zhuangzi* appeared in 1922, notably at the encouragement of his friend Papini. This,

²⁸ It only appears in Sabbadini's bibliography, where Novaro is mentioned within brackets as the prefacer of *Acque d'autunno*. However, it is worth noting that the summary of *Acque d'autunno* on the back cover of the facsimile reprint of the fourth edition published by Laterza is signed by Lionello Lanciotti (1925-2015), one of the leading Italian sinologists of the twentieth century.

²⁹ While this exact phrase cannot be found in Epicurean sources, it has been referred to many times in later philosophers as in Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii* [8.28.12] or in Plutarch's treatise *Εἰ καλῶς εἴρηται τὸ λάθε βιώσας* -*De latenter vivendo* within his *Ἠθικά* - *Moralia* (cf. Roskam 2007).

however, was a crucial moment in Novaro's life: in 1917, during the First World War, he lost his son Cellino, with whom he had often shared reflections on Zhuangzi's thought; in 1919, after two decades, he permanently suspended the publication of his review *La Riviera Ligure*, which had so significantly contributed to the dissemination of new literature in the early twentieth century; later, in the 1920s, his poetic inspiration waned, following the publication of his finalised anthology *Murmuri ed echi* in 1919. Novaro, now in his fifties, appears to have entered a new and last phase of his life, marked by a retreat into hidden living – a twenty-year period in which he greatly reduced his social contacts, seeking refuge in the constant rereading and reediting of his *Acque d'autunno*, which he dedicated to the memory of his son.

In Biagi's life, the *Zhuangzi* took its shape in 1921 (according to the date on the title page) at an equally pivotal moment in his existence. Biagi had departed from the Franciscan order only two years earlier, joined the American evangelical church in 1920, married Sofia, and moved to Sicily, where he began his pastoral ministry and soon encountered direct confrontations with local fascist groups. In 1921, he was transferred to Avellino, where he was already noted by the Prefectures for his anti-fascist activities, to the point of being nicknamed 'a communist evangelical pastor'. His life during this period was marked by severe hardships and poverty due to the mission's meagre financial support and restrictions on the public exercise of his ministry because of the accusations against him. At this stage in his life, 'living in hidden' was for Biagi both a necessity forced by circumstances and a way to embrace a life sublimated through the practice of extreme frugality; a way of life that resonated not only with his evangelical proselytisation but perhaps even more with the words of the *Zhuangzi*, in his return to the essence of the inner voice, essential for strengthening the spirit and restoring harmony with the external world.

Consequently, based on the points outlined above, it is evident that the marginalisation experienced by both Novaro and Biagi can be attributed to life circumstances, and thus partially viewed as a conscious choice from their side. For Novaro, the publication of *Acque d'autunno* marked the culmination of a spiritual transformation that had been underway for at least a decade. Free from material and prestige-driven aims, Novaro's dedication to Zhuangzi's thought thus appears to arise from the spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) that repeatedly surfaces as an existential axis in the life of the Daoist sage.

In contrast, Biagi's marginalisation results from external forces that compelled him to pursue his work and research with caution and discretion over more than two decades. In this respect, Biagi had to accept it as a constraint that decisively shaped his future decisions. Nevertheless, he did not adopt an eremitic existence;

rather, he sought, within the limitations of his circumstances, opportunities to have his expertise acknowledged within the sinological field. This effort indeed began with an (unsuccessful) attempt to apply as a lecturer at the Oriental Institute of Naples in 1926. Although he remained outside the formal academic sphere, his close scrutiny by authorities likely constituted an additional barrier to any such efforts at professional engagement. Therefore, his 'repentance' in 1942 – a gesture certainly simulated, as several indications suggest that he maintained connections with partisan groups well beyond that date – should be understood from this vantage point. Yet, this act eventually allowed him to establish contact with Giuseppe Tucci and commence his, regrettably brief, career as a Chinese instructor for the ISMEO.

By taking into account all these elements, which played a decisive role in shaping the very different lives of Novaro and Biagi, we can better understand and appreciate the fruit of their work by properly contextualising it within the diverse milieus in which it developed.

A century later, we stand in an environment where those responsible for disseminating knowledge must fulfil all necessary standards to produce works that adhere to scientific rigour, accessibility, and clarity. The practice of offering provocative justifications to implicitly excuse any perceived shortcomings no longer aligns with the expectations of our era.

In their own unique ways, Novaro and Biagi were pioneering figures whose paths illuminate the significant responsibilities of facilitating communication across cultures. Their work exemplifies the essential task of harmonising cultural sensitivity with intellectual integrity, offering a model for fostering meaningful and respectful knowledge exchange. Their contributions, beside any inherent shortcoming, underscore the importance of a thoughtful approach, respecting cultural nuances while upholding intelligibility and ethical awareness. By examining the tracks they established, we gain valuable understandings into the complex challenges and opportunities within the evolving landscape of intercultural dialogue, informing future approaches that prioritise authentic insight unmarred by pretentiousness or mannerism.

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