

Book Review

Mara Carocci, Luca Pisano and Emanuele Banfi, *Agostino Biagi e la sua traduzione in cinese della Divina Commedia*, Accademia della Crusca: Firenze, 2024; 129 pp.: ISBN 9788833880174, €15.00 (PBK)

Reviewed by: Feng Lisi , Nankai University, China

This volume is the first publication concerning Agostino Biagi's (1882–1957) translation of the *Divine Comedy*. Biagi's translation is particularly significant as it represents the first complete Chinese version of Dante's great work. Prior to this, it was widely believed that the first Chinese translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* was Qian Daosun's *Shen Qu Yi Luan*, published in *Story Magazine* in September 1921. However, Qian's translation includes only the first three cantos of the *Inferno*, whereas Biagi's work is a complete translation.

Not only did Biagi provide a full translation of this great poem, but he also employed four-, five-, and seven-character metrical forms, integrating Western classics into the framework of classical Chinese literature. This approach showcases the unique characteristics of the *Divine Comedy* within the context of Chinese metrical poetry and highlights the interaction between the two poetic languages. Consequently, Biagi's translation occupies an irreplaceable position in the history of the Chinese translations of the *Divine Comedy*.

As Paolo D'Achille, the president of the Accademia della Crusca, points out in the preface to this volume, it is the oldest version of Dante's masterpiece in this Eastern language. This translation is not accomplished by a Chinese author but rather by an Italian (specifically, a Tuscan, as Agostino Biagi was born in Fossato di Cantagallo, which is now located in the province of Prato). Therefore, contrary to the most common and arguably "standard" practice, this translation was not carried out by a speaker of the "target language", but rather by a speaker of the "source language". In discussing Biagi's life experience, President D'Achille remarked that his journey is marked by a diverse range of roles. Transitioning from Franciscan to Baptist, anti-fascist, and ultimately communist, these transformations in identity illustrate the complexity and variability of his life trajectory.

A photograph of Biagi dressed in traditional Chinese attire is located after the preface and before the main text. In the photo he appears elegant, with a gaze that is both resolute and gentle. In 1894, at the age of just 12, Biagi entered the Franciscan Convent of Bethlehem, a monastery which hosted some Chinese people from the Laohokou parish in the Hubei Province. Biagi's initial introduction to Chinese language and culture

came from two Chinese youths he encountered at the monastery. Importantly, the early language training he received was in Classical Chinese (*wenyanwen*), which later enabled him to translate the *Divine Comedy* in the form of ancient Chinese poetry, allowing him to navigate skillfully between the two ancient poetic languages of China and Italy.

Biagi's *Divine Comedy* manuscripts consist of seven handwritten volumes, each bound by traditional Chinese style hand-sewn stitching and accompanied by beautifully illustrated images, meticulously crafted by the translator. Within the entire archive, there is no explicit record of when he began to develop an interest in translating the *Divine Comedy*. Among the seven manuscripts, only the version that appears to be the final draft is marked with the date 1921, providing direct evidence for estimating the timeline of his translation work.

This volume highlights the commitment of the Accademia della Crusca to publicizing the significant metaphrastic (and beyond) endeavor of Biagi. It was collaboratively created by three authors: Mara Carocci, the great-granddaughter of Agostino Biagi, thanks to whom the "Fondo Biagi" was donated to the Crusca; Luca Pisano, a professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Genoa, who wrote an important early essay on Biagi; and Emanuele Banfi, a classicist linguist with specific interests in Chinese and Japanese, and an academic member of the Crusca.

In 2021, Mara Carocci discovered the manuscript of the *Divine Comedy* in her family archives and, on the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, donated both the manuscript and Biagi's complete collection to the Accademia della Crusca. This book opens with Carocci's article, which reconstructs the image of Biagi with both understandable emotional engagement and necessary objectivity, going beyond merely providing basic biographical information. Carocci offers a detailed description of the materials found in the Biagi collection, including anti-fascist writings, some of which are in Chinese. Additionally, she analyzes the sources of Biagi's correspondence, suggesting that after returning to Italy, Biagi continued to receive Chinese materials from friends.

Luca Pisano contributed an article that provides a detailed description of the manuscripts and a thought-provoking stylistic reading of Dante's translation. In 1902, twenty-year-old Biagi traveled to Laohokou and Hankou in China's Hubei province, where he worked as a missionary for at least seven years. According to letters from his wife, Sofia Lippi, Biagi began translating Dante's masterpiece during his time in China. This suggests that he likely completed multiple versions of the translation before 1921 and may have embarked on this monumental translation project as early as a decade prior. Professor Pisano, subsequently, compares passages from different versions of the first canto of the *Inferno*, focusing on lexical choices, and analyzing polysemy and metaphor, two elements of great significance in the analysis of the *Divine Comedy*.

Emanuele Banfi examines the substantial semantic differences in Dante's use of the term "libertà" (freedom) by analyzing the tercets from vv. 70–72 of the first canto of *Purgatorio*. Professor Banfi highlights how Biagi's selection of the disyllabic Chinese term "ziyou" as a corresponding translation reflects this conceptual framework of "libertà". While Banfi notes that "ziyou" does not fully convey the nuance of Dante's

“libertà,” it is regarded as the closest available equivalent. Nonetheless, the semantic gap between Dante’s concept of “libertà” and its Chinese interpretation remains significant. This disparity underscores the challenges of achieving full equivalence when translating across languages and cultures.

In conclusion, although this volume provides an initial and preeminent study of Agostino Biagi and his translated *Divine Comedy*, many important research directions remain to be explored in depth. First, the study of the rhythm and prosody in Biagi’s translations is a key point. His adoption of the classical Chinese poetic forms of four-, five-, and seven-character lines to integrate the Western literary classic *Divine Comedy* into Chinese classical poetics suggests that further research into the phonetic choices and rhythmic handling in his translations will reveal his formal innovations and challenges. Secondly, how Biagi expressed the concepts like ‘Dio’, ‘limbo’, ‘anima’ in Chinese, and how he dealt with the incongruities in vocabulary and semantics between the two language and cultural systems, constitutes an important entry point for studying his translation strategies. Moreover, Biagi’s contributions to translation are not limited to the *Divine Comedy* itself, since he also translated other classical Chinese works, such as the *Analects of Confucius* and *Chuang Tzu*. In addition, he also compiled a Russian and a Chinese dictionary, and some Chinese culture textbooks. In summary, a comprehensive study of Agostino Biagi requires a multifaceted approach that will lead to a holistic understanding of his life and academic contributions.

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ORCID iD

Feng Lisi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1210-3854>