



Posted on September 7, 2020 by helenwanglondon

Previous Next

104. Chinese children's literature in Italy – interview with Paolo Magagnin

Paolo Magagnin is Professor of Chinese at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He is also a translator and promoter of Chinese children's literature. We're delighted that he agreed to be interviewed, to tell us about his work, his experiences as a translator, and the expanding world of Chinese children's books in Italy! We're also pleased to post this interview in September, which is #WorldKidLitMonth.

HW: Please tell us about yourself. What would you like our readers to know about you?

PM: I am a professor of Chinese at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, where I have been teaching for a decade. I am lucky enough to be able to translate Chinese fiction, however occasionally, as a way to take a break from my teaching duties and to "stay in shape" as a translator. I have translated a few novels, short stories, and novellas by Xiao Bai 小白, Xu Zechen 徐则臣, Chen He 陈河, A Yi 阿乙, Zhu Wen 朱文, and a few other contemporary fiction writers. Unfortunately, translation is not highly valued in the Italian academic, where it is often seen as little more than a pastime – or worse, a distraction from "serious" research. Because of this, I do not translate as much as I used to or would like to anymore, but still jump at the opportunity whenever I can. I am currently working on the translation of Shuang Xuetao's 双雪涛 short story collection "Mosses on the Plain" 《平原上的摩西》. However, what may be of most interest to the readers of the blog is the fact that I have translated two of Cao Wenxuan's 曹文轩 most successful books, *Bronze and Sunflower* 《青铜葵花》 and *The Straw House* 《草房子》.

Girasole and *La Scuola dal Tetto di Paglia*, the Italian editions of *Bronze and Sunflower*, and *The Straw House*, both by Cao Wenxuan, translated by Paolo Magagnin (image source: Giunti)

HW: How did you come to translate Cao Wenxuan's *Bronze and Sunflower*?

PM: I reckon this is one of those mysteries that often occur in the translation world. In September 2014, totally out of the blue, I received an email from the director of the children's series of Giunti, one of the top publishing houses in Italy, and surely the biggest in terms of literature for children and young adults. She told me they had recently purchased the rights to the book, and that "my name had come up" while they were looking for a translator. She asked me if I was interested in taking the job, and I quickly said yes despite the tight deadline – only 4 months – which fell right in the middle of a busy semester and a research trip to Beijing. I had only translated three novels by then, and I was anything but an established translator from Chinese. To this day, I do not know in what circumstances and thanks to whom "my name had come up", but it was the beginning of an extraordinary, and sometimes rocky, journey. As far as I know, no Chinese-language children's book had been previously translated into Italian at that time, so Cao's novel was a first. I think that, by choosing to embark on this project, the publisher took a leap into the (almost) unknown. A French edition, *Bronze et Tournesol*, tr. Brigitte Guilbaud, was available (Giunti sent it to me as a reference, naively hoping I would base my own translation on it). The rumour mill had probably been running for a while in the international publishing world, and your English translation was probably already in the works. Moreover, Cao's reputation was already growing as a candidate for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, which he eventually won in 2016. So this whole thing was the result of a mix of fortunate conditions. I am happy I was at the right place at the right time – although totally unsuspectingly.



Bronze et Tournesol (French) and *Bronze and Sunflower*, by Cao Wenxuan, translated by Brigitte Guilbaud (French) and Helen Wang (English)

If I can spend a few words on the translation itself, I will point out that translating Cao was a great training ground. Before that, in my brief experience as a translator, I had never fully realized what was at stake, or had to discuss or justify my choices, or been required to work with a very specific model reader in mind. But then, especially with *Bronze and Sunflower*, I had to outline an extremely detailed translation project. Most importantly, I was confronted with all the constraints that are inherent in the genre. Some of these constraints were objective, as I had to ponder my lexical and syntactic choices so as to fit the age group that the publisher wished to address – I was told at the outset that my readers were expected to be between 10 and a very optimistic 15, but Giunti eventually settled for 11 (as marked on the book's webpage). Some other constraints I felt were simply made up and preposterous, which caused me to start more than one fight with the series director and the editor. For instance, I fiercely objected to the choice to delete some of the numerous lyrical, bucolic passages (which, I was told, were unusual and would cause young Italian readers to lose interest), as well as the postface, and to systematically replace my colourful expressions and idioms (which I inserted for the sake of both the pleasure of reading and the readers' stylistic education) with more commonplace (borderline dull) ones. A few of my demands were met, many others were not. I had my fair share of distress, but all in all, the whole process really helped me grow as a translator and become more fully aware of my role, of my power and of its limits.

HW: Could you tell us more about Chinese children's books that are now available in Italian?

PM: Compared to the French and the Anglo-American market, the Italian publishing world has always been conservative and narrow-minded when it comes to the literature of the Sinosphere, including literature targeted at children and young adults. Since *Bronze and Sunflower* was published, and especially after Cao won the Andersen Award, however, Italian publishers began to be slightly more alert to Chinese-language children's books. A couple years after *Bronze and Sunflower* (2015), Giunti asked me to translate *The Straw House* (2018) and another very talented colleague was asked to translate *Ximi* (which will hopefully be available in bookshops soon). Having said this, the Italian situation is still far from satisfying, and interest in this literature has not boomed as it has in other markets. I tried to use what little bargaining power I have to promote a few texts that I considered were worth publishing, but so far to no avail. For example, I tried to interest Giunti in Lin Man-chiu's 林满秋 *The Ventriquist's Daughter* 《腹语师的女儿》, providing your English translation as reference. But, I was told the story was too dark and disturbing for the audience they had in mind.

However, picture books are an entirely different story. The most striking example is Taiwanese writer and illustrator Jimmy Liao's 几米 amazing works. Thanks to the tireless and passionate endeavours of translator and agent Silvia Torchio, they have been published in Italian since the early 2010s by a few forward-thinking Italian publishing houses, notably Edizioni Gruppo Abele, Terre di Mezzo, and Camelozampa (incidentally, the latter was awarded the BOP – Bologna Prize for the Best Children's Publishers of the Year prize at the 2020 BCBF). Jimmy Liao's latest Italian translation, *Gatti come noi* (*Mi manchi, dove sei?*) 《丢失了一只猫》(A Cat Went Missing), was published a few months ago.



Gatti come noi (*Mi manchi, dove sei?*) 《丢失了一只猫》 (Image: a Cat Went Missing) by Jimmy Liao, tr. Silvia Torchio (image source: Terre di mezzo)

One picture book that I was pleasantly surprised to see translated is Xu Lu's 徐鲁 *L'erba magica di Tu Youyou*. *La scienziata che sconfisse la malaria* 《神奇的小草》 (Tu Youyou's Miraculous Herb). The scientist who beat malaria), translated by Beatrice Masini, illustrated by Alice Coppini. The book gives the life story of Tu Youyou 屠呦呦. In 2015, indeed, in the Italian market, books popularizing science for young readers are an ever-growing sub-segment.



Xu Lu's 徐鲁 *L'erba magica di Tu Youyou*. *La scienziata che sconfisse la malaria* 《神奇的小草》 (Tu Youyou's Miraculous Herb). The scientist who beat malaria), tr. Beatrice Masini, illus. Alice Coppini (image source: editorialescienza)

Finally, I'd like to mention a bold experiment made by the publishing house associated with a platform devoted to Chinese-Italian cultural exchange, Cina in Italia. They have recently made available Bai Bing's 白冰 picture book *L'albero di ombrelli* 《雨伞树》 (The Umbrella Tree), translated by Giulia Carbone and illustrated by Li Hongzhan 李红专. It is interesting to see this as a partially bilingual edition with an overtly educational twist, as it features a section that encourages children to learn a number of Chinese characters and to practice their writing. There are many other examples of successful and enjoyable Chinese picture books that are currently available in Italian, but I will limit myself to these few examples. As for the relative predominance of this genre, I assume it is generally perceived by publishers as being more easily marketable compared to other forms of children's literature (especially novels, short stories being sort of taboo in the Italian publishing industry), not to mention that the costs of translation are significantly lower!



Bai Bing's 白冰 *L'albero di ombrelli* 《雨伞树》 (The Umbrella Tree), tr. Giulia Carbone, illus. Li Hongzhan 李红专 [image source: cinainitalia]

Anyway, I do not think the success of picture books lies in the fact that they make for "easy" reading, which seems to be what most publishers look for. If you take Jimmy Liao's works, for instance, the topics and feelings they portray – loss, death, loneliness etc. – are undeniably as deep and "difficult" – and more often than not, deeper – than those that can be found in more "serious" children's fiction. Hopefully, in the next future, the growing interest for picture books will boost the introduction and circulation of other works: they could act as a reassuring market foundation for publishers, and as "gateway" books for young readers, once they are ready to move on to more complex and more articulate forms.

HW: You've also examined the translation process in a very professional and scholarly way. However, I (and many of our readers) am not trained in translation studies, theory or linguistics. Could you tell us about what's involved, what are some of the key things you look for?

PM: When you look at it through the prism of translation, children's literature is a miniature world that allows you to engage in virtually endless reflection, and to do so from a multitude of different perspectives. In this sense, children's books are a real treasure trove for us scholars of translation. Of course, the typical aspect one can analyse is the textual level: the translator's lexical and syntactic choices, the handling of registers, the translation of proper nouns etc. However, if you have an interest in the economics of translation, you can also investigate children's books as products on a market that possesses a number of distinct characteristics. For example, if you are interested in sociological dynamics, you can examine the complex network of agents, scouts, sponsors, publishers, editors, translators, and institutions that work together – or despite one another – to select the texts to be translated, and which influence the mechanisms of translation. Or you might want to explore the psycho-linguistic aspects of translated children's literature, its importance for the literacy and literary education of foreign readers, its significance for cross-cultural communication etc. Of course, all these aspects and approaches are by no means unique to children's literature. However, here they are characterized by a set of unique features and a much higher degree of differentiation, because of the specific nature of the stakeholders involved, the multiple genres that fall within the umbrella category of "children's books", the clearly separate age groups of the readers that different books address, and so on.

As for my own work as a scholar, the aspects of children's literature that intrigue me the most are the same ones that I was – and still am – confronted with as a translation practitioner, with a twofold focus. On the one hand, I carry out research on the manipulation of translation manuscripts by publishers and editors. Textual adaptation in its various, more or less ethically correct forms, is a widespread practice in the translation of children's books – and, as I said above, I experienced this phenomenon first-hand. More generally, I focus on the linguistic and translational policies, as well as on the ideological factors that govern Chinese children's literature in translation. On the other hand, I also have a sociological interest in the politics of promotion and reception of children's books, with an eye to the role of Chinese official and non-official players (governmental bodies and sponsors, critics, and academics), the work of foreign publishers and agents, and the impact of literary awards. In this sense, the "Cao Wenxuan fever" is a textbook example of how literary exchanges can be scrutinised from a sociological perspective, shedding light on the dynamics at play in the circulation of literature – which is not limited to children's books.

HW: Has your interest in Chinese children's books influenced your colleagues and students?

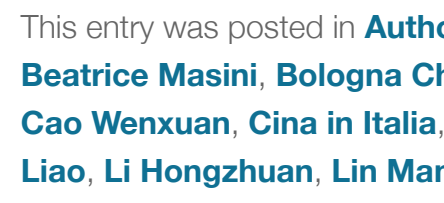
PM: Quite a few of my colleagues were interested in children's literature, either as translators or scholars, long before I even considered trying my hand at it. If anything, it was their interest that influenced me! But the impact of my work, however limited, is definitely more visible when it comes to my students. When I started using examples from children's books in my translation courses, and then posting news and articles related to Chinese children's fiction on my semi-institutional Facebook page, I quickly noticed this struck a chord with them. My MA students contacted me with surprisingly clear ideas about what they wanted to do for their thesis. Unsurprisingly, many of them were interested in Cao Wenxuan, but others were looking for authors and books that were less widely known. Since then, I have supervised some very interesting and well-argued pieces of research: eg, on the narrative of difference in Cao's *Ding ding dang dang* 《叮叮当当》 series; on the perception of Tang Sulan's 汤素兰 stories by children of different age groups; on the narratological and semiotic implications of the translation of picture books, and so on. All of these students were very highly motivated. Some of them, driven by a strong desire to undertake a career as professional translators of children's literature, even started sending out resumes and translation samples to publishing houses. And it was an extremely proud moment when the In Altre Parole translation competition at the Bologna Children's Book Fair 2018 – China was the guest of honour country that year – was won by a former student of mine!

HW: It's wonderful to learn how the interest in Chinese children's literature in growing in Italy, and I hope we can look forward to featuring some of your colleagues and students in the future!

Follow Paolo Magagnin on:

- his staff web-page: <https://www.unive.it/dato/people/5532091>
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/paolo.magagnin.cafoscarscience2>
- Researchgate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Paolo_Magagnin2

SHARE THIS:



Be the first to like this.

RELATED

- 50. Interview with Chloé Garcia Roberts, translator of the picture book "Feather" by Cao Wenxuan and Roger Mello January 25, 2019 in "Authors"
- 149. Interview with Chiara Tognetti about Chinese children's books and rights March 2, 2022 in "Authors"
- 151. Amanda Ruiging Flynn on children's books and bookstores in Taiwan and Singapore April 23, 2022 in "Authors"

This entry was posted in [Authors](#), [Books](#), [Publishers](#), [Translators](#) and tagged [Alice Coppini](#), [Bai Bing](#), [Beatrice Masini](#), [Bologna Children's Book Fair](#), [Brigitte Guilbaud](#), [Bronze and Sunflower](#), [Ca' Foscari](#), [Cao Wenxuan](#), [Cina in Italia](#), [Edizioni Gruppo Abele](#), [Giulia Carbone](#), [Giunti](#), [In Altre Parole](#), [Italy](#), [Jimmy Liao](#), [Li Hongzhan](#), [Lin Man-chiu](#), [Paolo Magagnin](#), [Silvia Torchio](#), [The Straw House](#), [The Ventriquist's Daughter](#), [Tu Youyou](#), [Ximi](#), [Xu Lu](#) by [helenwanglondon](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...