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Between Images and Words: Ruan Guang-min's *Railway Sonata* and its Journey from Chinese to Italian

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Although overshadowed by the popularity of Japanese manga, Taiwanese comics (or *manhua*, as they are known in Chinese) are experiencing a true golden age both domestically and abroad, as proven by the numerous international awards received by local artists, as well as the translations of their works into several languages. Ruan Guang-min (1971–) represents a paradigmatic example of how an author whose comics are culture-specific has managed to transcend both geographical (Taiwan) and linguistic (Sinophone) boundaries. After briefly contextualizing the current situation of Taiwanese comics and presenting Ruan and his oeuvre, the contribution analyzes the Italian translation of *Railway Sonata*, primarily drawing on Klaus Kaindl's studies on comics translation and Lucía Molina and Amparo Hurtado Albir's research on the translation of culturemes, or culture-specific elements. More specifically, the article focuses on the rendition of linguistic messages integrated into the images, of elements with strong sociocultural connotations, and of orality. This study reveals that techniques such as repetitio + adiectio were employed for text embedded in images, where the original language and script are preserved in the translation, accompanied by the translator's notes. Additionally, different strategies were used for culture-specific items. Given the absence of research on Taiwanese *manhua* and on comics translation from Chinese into Italian, this exploratory study aims at providing a steppingstone for future research in said fields.
Keywords: Chinese to Italian translation; comics translation; Taiwanese *manhua*; Ruan Guang-min; Sinophone graphic novel

1. Introduction

Taiwanese comics, though not as globally renowned as Japanese manga, are experiencing a golden age both domestically and internationally. This success is due to the rising quality of *manhua* (漫畫, 'comics' in Chinese) produced over the past decade and substantial government support for their creation and distribution. Moreover, translations of these works into other languages are becoming increasingly common. Despite this international presence, however, academic research on Taiwanese comics is still in its infancy compared to studies on manga, Belgian *bande dessinée*, or Argentinian *historieta*. Scholars

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have argued that research on Taiwanese comics is at a preliminary stage, and most studies focus on mapping out the field (Weng 2020).

Research on the translation of Taiwanese *manhua* is virtually non-existent. The present study aims to address this gap by analyzing the Italian translation of *Railway Sonata* (Tiedao Zoumingqu 鐵道奏鳴曲, 2017; Italian edition, 2023) by Ruan Guang-min (阮光民, b. 1971), so as to explore how certain features of the Chinese language and Taiwanese culture are conveyed into Italian and to examine how the interplay between text and images impacts the translation process, considering the unique nature of comics translation, often considered "subordinate" (Hurtado Albir 2004, 72),[1] since, according to Ignacio Villena Álvarez (1999, 509), both linguistic and extralinguistic elements, along with the spatial constraints of speech balloons, shape the translation process and its outcome.

This paper will briefly review existing studies on comics translation and *manhua* from Taiwan, provide an overview of the local comic industry with a focus on its international reach, and analyze the linguistic and sociocultural elements in both *Railway Sonata* and its Italian rendition. Although far from being exhaustive, by focusing on the translator's first-hand experience, this research aims to offer insights for those engaged in translation research as well as for professionals in the field.

2. Comics Translation

Comics translation presents unique challenges compared to other types of editorial translation due to the need to adapt strategies to the constraints of the visual medium (Zanettin 1998). However, despite these difficulties, translation studies have often overlooked it. Paco Rodríguez (2019, 12) points out that oftentimes scholars have only a superficial understanding of the medium and focus exclusively on the verbal component. Many studies limit themselves to specific cases, such as María Carreras's (2008) analysis of the Spanish translation of a few Italian comics, Cristina Aranzazu Huertas Abril's (2016) linguistic examination of the Spanish translation of the graphic novel *Maus*, and Lamia Khalil's (2018) investigation of the Arabic translation of onomatopoeias, interjections, and idiomatic expressions in two *Tintin* albums. Anna Macedoni's (2010) comparative study of the

[1] Sometimes it is also referred to as "constrained translation," a term coined by Christopher Titford (1982) to refer to the translation of audiovisual products, also a type of multimedia.

language used in Italian translations of American comics versus those originally written in Italian also focuses on the verbal message. Nevertheless, looking solely at language without a comprehensive approach to the non-verbal component risks labeling it as a process heavily constrained by the technical and visual specifics of the medium (Zanettin 2008b, 23). Therefore, as Rodríguez (2019, 27) suggests, the ideal research on comics translation should consider both linguistic and extralinguistic elements.

Earlier studies look at the subordination of the linguistic message to elements such as spatial constraints (Castillo Cañellas 1996) or onomatopoeias (Valero Garcés 2000). Nadine Celotti (2000) challenges the notion that comics translation is restricted by extralinguistic elements, proposing a semiological approach that accounts for the complementarity of text and visual messages. Similarly, Michał Borodo (2015, 22) and Klaus Kaindl (1999) emphasize the multimodal nature of comics translation, highlighting the interplay between verbal messages and images. Kaindl (1999) asserts that "[i]n the process of translation comics undergo a number of changes, with respect to both language and the level of the picture. Neither a linguistic nor a purely textual approach is sufficient to deal comprehensively with these changes" (265). Moreover, he significantly contributes to comics translation research by systematizing elements into linguistic components (title, dialogues in speech balloons, narrative text, inscriptions on objects, onomatopoeias), typography, and iconography (drawings, color, panel layout, shading, motion lines). He also suggests translation techniques such as repetitio, deletio (detractio), adiectio, transmutatio, and substitutio (Kaindl 1999, 273-283).

Given its relevance, Kaindl's categorization is considered in this study and is briefly explained here:

- Repetitio: Repeating the source text's (ST) linguistic message in the target text (TT) without changes (Kaindl 1999, 275).
- Deletio (detractio): Removing parts of the ST or images so they do not appear in the TT (Kaindl 1999, 277).
- Adiectio: Adding linguistic or graphic elements which are not present in the ST or coloring images originally in black and white (Kaindl 1999, 278–279).
- Transmutatio: Placing linguistic elements or images in a different order in the TT (Kaindl 1999, 281).

- Substitutio: Replacing ST elements with others of equivalent value in the target culture, such as substituting an American football with a soccer ball in a German edition of *Peanuts* (Kaindl 2004, 184).

Over the past fifteen years, there has been a modest increase in anthologies aimed at reorganizing comic translation studies. Notably, Federico Zanettin's (2008a) collective volume aspires to debunk two myths: that only the text in speech balloons and panels is translated, and that images are universally understood (Zanettin 2008b, 21).

Recently, Borodo edited a special issue of the journal *inTRAlinea*, considering it

> an attempt to grasp the diversity and complexity of comics in translation. It may confirm some of the pre-determined assumptions we hold about translated comics, but may also challenge and question others, adding to our understanding of what happens when comics cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. (Borodo 2023)

The special issue stands out for its broad linguistic and geographical scope, including regions beyond Europe and the Americas. Three of the nine contributions focus on comics from Japan and one on Korean graphic novels. These studies, therefore, also mirror the rising number of East Asian graphic narratives published in markets such as France, Italy, and Spain.[2]

However, when it comes to translation from Chinese into Italian, neither of the two recent—and only—volumes dedicated entirely to this language combination (Pozzi 2022; Pesaro 2023) addresses the translation of graphic narratives.[3] This indicates that research on the topic is still in its early stages, confirming a general observation made by Celotti (2000, 3): in textbooks for the training of future translators, comic translation is generally absent.

[2] In 2022, Spain saw the publication of 1,495 Japanese comics, which ranked just behind American ones (1,899). While Korean *manhwa* do not yet rival Japanese manga in numbers, they are increasingly available in European markets, often buoyed by the overall success of Korean pop culture (K-pop). Also in 2022, Spanish publishers released twenty Korean volumes (Tebeosfera 2022). A recent study by the Italian Publishers Association lumps Japanese, Korean, and Sinophone (including Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong) comics all under the "manga" label. In Italy, out of a total of 3,272 volumes published in 2021, 1,521 were Asian comics, representing a 42.3% increase from the previous year (AIE 2022, 12).

[3] Silvia Pozzi's (2022) monograph focuses on literary translation, with particular attention to contemporary Chinese and Sinophone fiction. In contrast, the anthology edited by Nicoletta Pesaro (2023) covers a wide range of texts, including theater, poetry, legal and tourism documents, as well as subtitling for arthouse films.

3. Taiwanese Comics

Although manga have been the most popular comics in Taiwan for decades, there has been a recent surge in both the quantity and quality of locally produced works. This growth is partly due to official initiatives such as the *Creative Comic Collection* (CCC – 創作集). Unlike other online platforms and comic magazines, CCC is not produced or distributed by private publishers but was established in 2009 by the National Science and Technology Council.

The relationship between Taiwanese *manhua* and their Japanese counterpart is complex. Manga arrived in Taiwan during Japanese colonial rule, before Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist army retreated to the island in 1949 (Lent 2015, 98). The first local comic, Liu Hsing-chin's *In Search of Immortals* (Xun Xian Ji 尋仙記) (Lent 1999, 24), debuted in the early 1950s. It succeeded in transforming Liu into a leading cartoonist (Gao 2002, 13), reflecting significant social and political changes.

However, the local comics industry faced a setback in the 1960s due to strict government censorship, with the "Guidelines for the Printing of Comic Books" (Bian Yin Lianhuan Tuhua Fudao Banfa 編印連環圖畫輔導辦法) implemented in 1962 and applied until martial law was lifted in 1987. These guidelines restricted both content and artistic aspects (Chen 2018). Despite this, the early 1960s were still a golden age for local *manhua* (Lee 2018, 24). As censorship became more strict, readers turned to graphic narratives from Japan, which were imported under the table by diplomats and travelers (Lee 2018, 43). These publications, often with explicit content, circulated illegally and reached readers through unauthorized translations.

While this influx was detrimental to the local industry, which remained stagnant for two decades, it exposed Taiwanese readers to diverse content and knowledge (Lee 2018, 7). Local artists began creating works similar in style to manga, thus benefiting technically and artistically from the influx of pirated Japanese comics (Chen and Chuko 2004, 886–887).

Despite extremely low wages, readers' preference for renting over buying comics, and a general lack of social respect (Lent 2015, 101), Taiwanese artists found new hope with the end of martial law, as this change allowed for greater freedom of expression. The 1992 Copyright law further boosted local comics by protecting creators' rights (MAE 1992, Article 1). Publishers like Tong Li Publishing (Dongli Chubanshe 東立出版社), previously known

for distributing pirated manga, adapted quickly to the changing environment. It not only complied with the new rules, but also supported local talent by establishing the Comics Newcomer Award in January 1992 and launching *Dragon Youth Monthly* (Long Shaonian Yuekan 龍少年月刊) and *Star Girls* (Xing Shaonü Yuekan 星少女月刊) later that year. These magazines promoted local *manhua*, with the former focusing on sci-fi and adventures, and the latter on romantic stories (Lent 1995, 195). Although Japanese manga remained prevalent, these initiatives significantly boosted local production. The 1990s also saw Taiwanese comics gain international attention. For example, Lin Cheng Te's *Young Guns*, initially published in 1990 and later in *tankōbon* (or standalone book) format, was translated into Korean, English, and Japanese (Wu 2016).

In the early 2000s, local comics faced major challenges such as the economic crisis, rising paper costs, and the impact of the internet on traditional publications. Online entertainment diverted readers, while pirated Taiwanese comics available on mainland Chinese websites reduced traditional publishing profits, leading to the closure of many *manhua* shops and a drop in print magazines. Meanwhile, manga continued to influence local tastes, often diminishing confidence in local comics (Wang 2010). To counterbalance this, the Ministry of Culture successfully established the Golden Comics Awards in 2010 to recognize the best national comics annually.

Internationally, the Taiwanese *manhua* industry is thriving due to government support and foreign interest in 'peripheral' comics traditions. Former Minister of Culture Cheng Li-Chun was instrumental in this success, leading to the creation of the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA) in 2019. TAICCA promotes local content, including comics, and its Taiwan Comic City (TCC) project showcases local graphic narratives through 'audio comics,' while also maintaining a catalog for foreign publishers.[4] Books From Taiwan (BFT), also funded by TAICCA, supports international promotion of Taiwanese literature and includes a range of comic books, whose translation rights are available for foreign publishers to purchase. Exposure at international festivals is crucial, too. Taiwan has had a pavilion at Angoulême since 2012, and in 2022, Taiwanese artists Chang Sheng and Zuo Hsuan participated in Lucca Comics & Games, the biggest event of its kind in Europe. These efforts help expand the reach

[4] "About TAICCA," *Taiwan Creative Content Agency*, accessed November 10, 2023, https://en.taicca.tw/page/about.

of Taiwanese *manhua*, with translations into languages such as Arabic, English, French, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, among others.

4. *Railway Sonata* and its Italian Translation

Published in Taiwan in 2017 by Yuan-Liou Publishing (Yuanliu Chuban gongsi 遠流出版公司), *Railway Sonata* is Ruan Guang-min's first work to be translated into Italian. The Italian edition, *Railway Sonata – Sinfonia ferroviaria*, was released in 2023 by Toshokan, a new publisher specializing in East Asian graphic narratives, including Japanese manga, Taiwanese and Hong Kong *manhua*, and Vietnamese *truyện tranh* (comics).

4.1 The Author

Born in 1973 in Douliu, Taiwan, Ruang Guang-min is a highly acclaimed and successful *manhua* artist. His national accolades include the Golden Comic Awards for Best Comic in 2012, 2017, and 2020, and Best Cross-Media Adaptation in 2020. Internationally, he won second place at the XIV Japan International Manga Award in 2020 and participated in the Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2012 and 2018, as well as other events in Germany, New York, and Italy.

His works, such as *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* (Donghuachun Lifating 東華春理髮廳) and *The Grocery Store* (Yongjiu Kam-a-tiam 用九柑仔店), have been translated into several languages and adapted into successful television series. *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* became Taiwan's first *manhua* turned into a TV series, airing its 40 episodes between 2012 and 2013. *The Grocery Store*, too, was adapted into a TV series available in Taiwan, Malaysia, and on Rakuten Viki. Ruan's global reach is supported by Taiwanese government initiatives, including listings in the BFT catalog, and his works are featured on Taiwan Comic City.

4.2 The *manhua*

Conceived as a sort of spin-off of *The Grocery Store*, *Railway Sonata* is a one-volume graphic novel containing four interconnected stories, each representing a season of the year and sewn together by the theme of train travel. As described on the inside flap of the Italian edition:

> Along Taiwan's Neiwan railway line, the fates of various characters intersect. Some will never meet again, while others will remain together for life. Stories that resemble poems, where Ruan Guang-min paints snapshots of Taiwanese life and universal emotions. Pieces of a mosaic that reveal the human soul. (Ruan 2023)[5]

In *Railway Sonata*, the first story, set in spring, follows Ah-Chieh, a city worker who, inspired by a handwritten B&B advertisement on a postcard, sends a reply to Jih-An, the sender. Regretting his impulsive decision, Ah-Chieh travels to Neiwan, the village where Jih-An lives and the terminus of one of Taiwan's most scenic railways, to retrieve his postcard. During his two-day stay, he and Jih-An develop a sweet romantic connection. The second story, set in summer, features a bride in her wedding dress who chases after the man who left her at the altar. On the same train line, she meets a conductor who offers her valuable pieces of life advice. As summer transitions to autumn in the third story, an elderly stationmaster in Jiuzantou nostalgically reflects on a youthful romance linked by a shared love for the piano. Finally, in the winter story, Professor Kuo, nicknamed 'Snail' and the character who connects this graphic novel to *The Grocery Store*, leaves everything behind to start a new life in Australia. He hopes to heal from the loneliness and abandonment he feels after his daughter and his ex-wife moved away following their divorce.

The four chapters, while independent, are tightly connected both temporally—through the changing seasons—and spatially—by the short railway line of just under 30 kilometers running from Hsinchu station on the island's northwest coast to the village of Neiwan. Ruan Guang-min explains:

> I wanted each section to be read independently, but I also wanted them to be connected by something, just like the four seasons, which, despite their differences, follow one another seamlessly. Differentiating the seasons through the landscape seemed the most obvious choice, as it would allow readers to easily identify them. But then I thought I should give the reader the chance to fully immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the seasons. That's why the volume begins with a love blossoming in spring, moves through the exuberance of summer, the melancholy of a farewell in

[5] "Lungo la linea ferroviaria Neiwan, a Taiwan, si incrociano i destini di vari personaggi. Alcuni non si rivedranno mai più, altri si uniranno per il resto della vita. Racconti che assomigliano a poesie, nei quali Ruan Guang-min dipinge spaccati di vita taiwanese e sentimenti universali. Tasselli di un mosaico che rivela l'animo umano" in the original. All translations from Italian and Chinese are my own, unless otherwise stated.

> autumn, and finally ends with the sorrow of winter, which, however, gives way to a new spring. (Ruan 2023, 180–181)[6]

4.3 The Translation

The work, as evident from the brief synopsis provided, is highly localized, while focusing on universal themes such as meeting and parting, nostalgia, and loneliness. It incorporates elements of Taiwanese geography, culture, and society. The Italian translation must take these aspects into consideration, and effectively convey the linguistic nuances of a text that features various registers, from the colloquial speech of some characters to the more poetic language of others and the narrator. Although most written messages in comics are dialogic and found in balloons, they can also be narrative or descriptive and placed elsewhere on the page. In this specific case, the narrative and descriptive texts overlay the images without being enclosed in rectangles, unlike other instances.

Additionally, there are other elements that enhance the linguistic message and contribute to the story. Some, for example, serve to contextualize it in time and space. The following sections will assess the translation of these elements using the techniques proposed by Kaindl (1999). To analyze culturally significant elements and linguistic registers, we will use the terminology suggested by Lucía Molina and Amparo Hurtado Albir (2002), who extensively discussed translation techniques for concepts pertaining to linguistic, social, and cultural contexts.

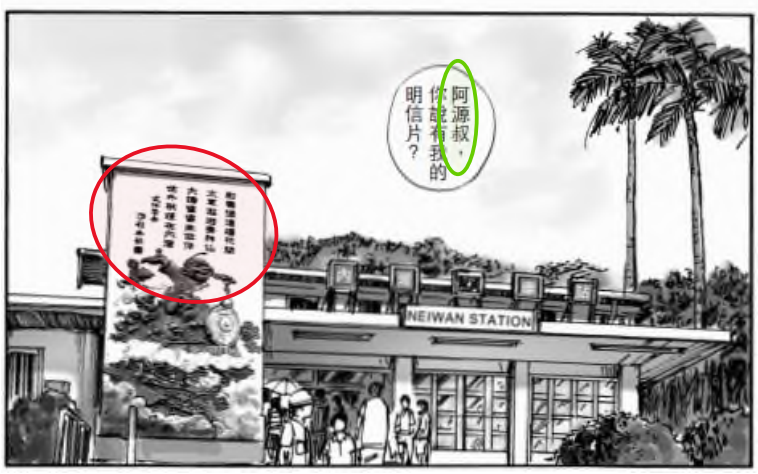
4.3.1 Translation of Text Integrated into Images. In comics, linguistic messages are sometimes integrated into the images, becoming part of a cohesive whole. This includes texts on postcards, SMS, pamphlets, product labels, and advertisements. While their treatment usually depends on their level of integration with the images—sometimes kept as they are (e.g., signs and graffiti) or replaced with translated text (e.g., newspaper clippings) (Kaindl 2010, 38)—in *Railway Sonata*, all such texts have been retained in their original Chinese

[6] "[V]olevo sì che ognuna potesse essere letta in modo indipendente, ma desideravo anche che fossero legate da qualcosa, proprio come le quattro stagioni che, seppur diverse, si susseguono una dopo l'altra senza brusche interruzioni. Differenziare le epoche dell'anno attraverso il paesaggio sarebbe stata la scelta più ovvia, oltre che quella che avrebbe permesso ai lettori di identificarle a colpo d'occhio. Ma poi ho pensato che dovevo dare a chi legge la possibilità di immergersi appieno nell'atmosfera delle stagioni. Per questo il volume inizia con un amore che germoglia in primavera, prosegue con l'esuberanza dell'estate, la malinconia di un addio autunnale e infine si chiude con la sofferenza dell'inverno che, però, lascerà il passo a una nuova primavera."

script, accompanied by the Italian translations as translator's notes, generally placed outside the panels. It is important to note that these decisions involve not only translation but also graphic design and lettering, and translators often do not have a say in the decision-making process. In the case of *Railway Sonata*, it is likely that the use of Chinese characters was preserved to maintain a key aspect of Taiwanese culture, thus replacing them with Italian text in the Latin alphabet was avoided.

Such culturally significant elements are present from the onset. For example, the first story opens with a scenic view of the Neiwan train station (figure 1), featuring lines by Liu Hsing-chin. The Italian translation reads: "In cielo nuvole iridescenti alla fioritura dei ciliegi, // leggiadri viaggiano i treni scortati dalle fate, // lasciatevi condurre dalla nostra zia Grossa // nel paradiso terrestre, qui a Neiwan" (In the sky, iridescent clouds at cherry blossom time, // trains travel gracefully escorted by fairies, // let our Big Auntie guide you // to this earthly paradise, here in Neiwan) (Ruan 2023, 7).

Figure 1. *Railway Sonata*, 7



In the Italian edition, the ST remains unchanged, that is, in Chinese script. Therefore, repetitio, which involves retaining the original language message in the TT as well (Kaindl 1999, 275), has been used. However, since the ST is translated in a footnote, the TT also employs adiectio, which, according to Kaindl (1999, 278), occurs when linguistic or graphic elements are added to the TT to replace or enrich the original content. In this specific case, the TT, placed at the top and outside the panel, is followed by an additional translator's note that provides the Italian-speaking audience with information known to the island's audience: "Liu

Hsing-chin è uno dei più grandi autori di fumetti taiwanesi originario della contea di Hsinchu (dove si trova Neiwan) e la zia Grossa è uno dei suoi personaggi più amati" (Liu Hsing-chin is one of the greatest Taiwanese comic authors from Hsinchu County [where Neiwan is located], and Big Auntie is one of his most beloved characters) (Ruan 2003, 7).

To better understand this type of explanatory adiectio, the categorization of translation techniques proposed by Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002) will come in handy. In their proposal, centered on the broader context of editorial translation, the two scholars discuss amplification, which refers to the addition of details that are not present in the original text (Molina and Hurtado Albir 2002, 510), as in the example above.

The same strategy of repetitio + adiectio + amplification has been used in other instances as well. For example, the handwritten note that the jilted bride gives to the conductor in the second story (figure 2) is retained in its original Chinese script in the TT. Its Italian translation, "Sei davvero come la primavera. Grazie, Chun-sheng ^_^ Li Chiu-fen" (You are truly like spring. Thank you, Chun-sheng ^_^ Li Chiu-fen) (Ruan 2023, 89), is placed at the bottom, outside the corresponding panel. Inside the panel, at the top right, one finds a translator's note deemed necessary to explain the wordplay between the characters' names and the text of the message, given the importance of the seasons in the work. It clarifies that "[i]l nome di lui, Chun-sheng, vuol dire "nato in primavera", mentre quello di lei, Chiu-fen, significa "profumo d'autunno" (his name, Chun-sheng, means 'born in spring', while hers, Chiu-fen, means 'autumn fragrance') (Ruan 2023, 89).

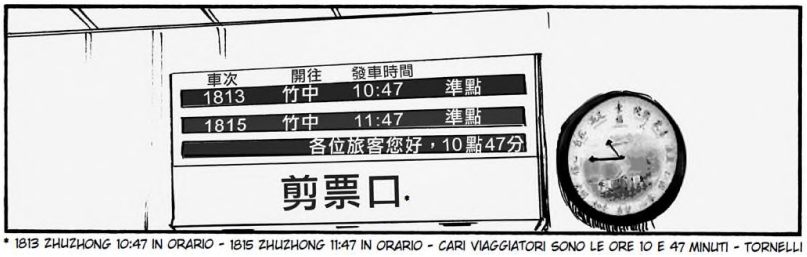
Figure 2. *Railway Sonata*, 89

Other linguistic messages integrated into the images were translated at the margin of the panels, presenting both the ST and the TT to the Italian audience without additional explanatory notes, as they lacked implicit cultural references or were easily understood by Italian readers. This applies to the SMS sent by the professor's ex-wife from the airport (figure 3), signs of commercial establishments (figure 4), and train schedule boards (figure 5).

Figure 3. *Railway Sonata*, 155

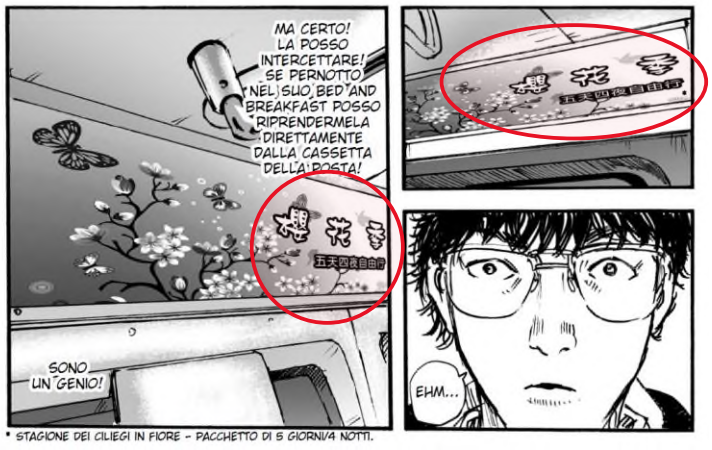
Figure 4. *Railway Sonata*, 144

Figure 5. *Railway Sonata*, 52



The same approach is used for the advertisement of a cherry blossom tour that inspires the protagonist in the first story to travel to retrieve his response to the postcard (figure 6). Although the Neiwan railway line is a well-known spot for cherry blossoms in Taiwan but not in Italy, no explanatory note was provided as this information is easily inferable from the context.

Figure 6. *Railway Sonata*, 18



As these examples show, the Italian edition does not differentiate between signs that are difficult to alter, such as shop signs and boards, and those that are crucial to the story but easier to edit, like text messages and handwritten notes. The decision was made to translate everything, not just the latter, as Kaindl (2010, 38) suggested, while, at the same time, always keeping the original text in Chinese script.

4.3.2 Translation of Culturally Significant Elements. In *Railway Sonata*, numerous culturally significant elements—referred to as "culturemes"—appear. These include people, objects, concepts, and phenomena tied to the local sociocultural, geographic, and historical context. Molina (2001, 97–98) identifies four main types of culturemes: those related to the natural environment (e.g., flora, fauna, landscapes, and place names); cultural heritage (e.g., material and religious culture, means of transportation, and artistic movements); social culture (e.g., salutations, calendars, and expressions); and linguistic culture (e.g., significant names, interjections, insults).

Here, I focus primarily on anthroponyms, toponyms, and elements related to material and social culture. For anthroponyms, when names like Chun-sheng and Chiu-fen had a direct connection with the overall meaning of the story, an explanatory note was added. However, translating names involved other choices, too. Although *pinyin* is the most internationally accepted system for transcribing Sinophone names, its use is not widespread in Taiwan. Hence, a modified Wade-Giles system, often used in Taiwan for official documents (Rovira-

Esteva 2018, 19), was employed.[7] Despite *pinyin*'s prevalence in Chinese-to-Italian editorial translation, using Wade-Giles in this translation better reflects Taiwanese naming conventions and signals the Taiwanese origin of the work, especially to readers familiar with Chinese language and Sinophone culture.[8]

Regarding place names, due to the wide variety of transcription systems used on the island, the translator did not use a single method but instead followed the most used system, on a case-by-case basis. For example, the Taipei subway station 新店區公所站 (Xindian qu gongsuo zhan) was rendered as "Xindian District Office," which makes use of *pinyin* for the district name (figure 7). The city of 新竹 (Xinzhu), the starting point of the Neiwan railway line, became "Hsinchu," adhering to the official transcription used by the local administration and by TRA (Taiwan Railways Administration).

Figure 7. *Railway Sonata*, 19

[7] For a brief overview of the transcription systems for Sinitic languages, see Rovira-Esteva (2018). For a more detailed discussion on the Latin alphabet transcription systems for both Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages spoken in Taiwan, refer to Lin (2015). In her article, the scholar notes that "[i]n the early decades of post-war Taiwan, the use of Romanization was limited, with Wade-Giles Romanization being the more commonly used system for transcribing people's names on passports" (Lin 2015, 199).

[8] Similarly, Pozzi (2022, 170) reflects on her Italian translation of *Last Letters from Montmartre* (Mengmate yi shu 蒙馬特遺書) by the late Taiwanese author Chiu Miao-Chin (邱妙津, Qiu Miaojin in *pinyin*). She confesses that "[i]mposing pinyin on this work was a forced measure, a superficial flattening of Taiwanese identity, probably invisible to most but no less serious" (Pozzi 2022, 170).

To translate cultural items, or "realia" (Osimo 2004, 63), various methods were employed. For instance, 粽子 (zongzi) (figure 8), a typical dish made of glutinous rice filled with meat and/or other ingredients and wrapped in bamboo leaves, was translated as "fagottino di riso" (rice dumpling). Additional information was deemed unnecessary since the images help Italian readers visualize its tetrahedral shape and size (figure 9). Two other options proposed by Pozzi (2022, 184) for literary translation, i.e., transliteration alone and transliteration with a clarifying note, were dismissed due to its opacity in the first instance and space constraints in the second.

Figure 8. *Railway Sonata*, 22

Figure 9. *Railway Sonata*, 85

For 便當袋 (biandang dai), "borsa per il pranzo" (lunch bag) or "portapranzo" (lunchbox) were used, translating the term into a familiar expression in Italian. Although these translations convey the original meaning, an important nuance related to Taiwanese

context was lost. *Biandang* is a loanword from Japanese, equivalent to the better-known *bentō* (弁当). Translating it as *bentō*, however, could be misleading and unnecessarily exoticizing, as it refers to a different reality from the island's context, while the term *biandang* is commonly used on the island without exotic connotations. Nevertheless, by adapting it, the Taiwanese identity was somewhat flattened.

Similarly, 柑仔店 (ganzaidian), a term from Taiwanese (pronounced kám-á-tiàm), was translated as "alimentari" (grocery store). While this conveys the term's meaning, it loses other connotations tied to Taiwanese language, local identity, and nostalgia. The term refers to old-style grocery stores that were central to community life before supermarkets and convenience stores became prevalent. It evokes a simpler past and was a significant social gathering spot in post-war Taiwan (Heisong Bowuguan n.d.). Despite this, the Italian version prioritized readability over the term's cultural and nostalgic value.[9]

Given the highly dialogic nature of the language used in the *manhua*, it is important to deal with another group of cultural elements: terms of address, or words used in direct speech to refer to the interlocutor. Unlike many European languages, Chinese has a sophisticated system of terms of address (Yang 2010, 738), so their translation into Italian requires careful consideration.

In the opening panel (figure 1), Jih-An, the young woman who owns the B&B, addresses the stationmaster, a middle-aged man, as 阿源叔 (A Yuan shu), translated into Italian as "Signor Ah-Yüan" (Mr. Ah-Yüan). The original expression comprises three parts: the prefix *a*, which in Taiwan precedes a monosyllabic name or the second character of a disyllabic name to express familiarity and respect (Pozzi 2022, 168), the given name (Yüan), and *shu*, which literally means "paternal uncle" but is commonly used as a respectful term for men of the same generation as the speaker's parents. Translating *shu* literally as "uncle" would be awkward and misleading in Italian. Therefore, the translator opted for what Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002, 510) call generalization, substituting a specific term with a more neutral one. The same approach was used for 康伯 (Kang bo), literally "Uncle Kang" used by the conductor to address an elderly traveler in the second story. Instead of translating *bo* as

[9] The term *ganzaidian/kám-á-tiàm*, central to the graphic novel *The Grocery Store*, has been translated into Italian as "drogheria." This slightly old-fashioned term for a grocer's shop is more evocative and better conveys the meaning of the original than the more generic and neutral "alimentari."

"paternal uncle" (specifically the father's older brother), it was rendered as "Signor Kang" (Mr. Kang) a more general and natural form of address in Italian.

It is also worth noting that Chinese sometimes uses terms of kinship as first-person pronouns. These are often difficult to maintain in translation. For example, in the second story, when the jilted bride angrily shouts, "Ho speso i migliori anni della mia vita e 10.000 dollari per dimagrire!" (I spent the best years of my life and $10,000 to lose weight!) (Ruan 2023, 61) while chasing the runaway groom, she uses 老娘 (laoniang), which literally means "old mother" but colloquially refers to oneself with a sense of pride or assertiveness, particularly in frustrating situations (Wang 2019, 32). Since the bride's mood and tone are clear from the images and the content of the speech bubble (figure 10), it was deemed unnecessary to find an equivalent for *laoniang* in the target language. This illustrates that sometimes visual support allows for more natural translation choices.

Figure 10. *Railway Sonata*, 61

4.3.3 Translation of Orality. In *Railway Sonata*, as in most graphic narratives, there are both narrative-descriptive texts and dialogic texts, the latter typically placed in balloons. When translating dialogue, it is essential for the translator to engage in a process similar to that of an adapter or dialogue writer in audiovisual media. This involves:

> Immersing oneself in the language of the film, understanding the "language" of the film, the communicative strategies chosen by the characters, the linguistic variety – what linguistics calls "register" – for each character and situation, and then selecting

> the appropriate "parallel registers" in the target language. (Paolinelli and Di Fortunato 2005, 3)[10]

Hence, the translator must constantly ask him/herself: how would a certain character speak in a given situation if the dialogue was carried out in Italian? Since Ruan Guang-min generally uses orality that only occasionally falls into slang, "immersing in the language" of the work did not require any particular effort from the translator. Nevertheless, the *manhua* features some passages where certain characters use rather colorful tones.

For instance, in the exchange between Ah-Chieh, the young city employee in the first story, and a passerby who is mad at Ah-Chieh, guilty of bumping into him, the stranger unleashes a series of curses (figure 11), which I will analyze here. Initially, he uses the term 掯 (ken), a graphic-phonic variant of 幹 (gan) (Ocean 2006) which, as an expletive, roughly equates to "fuck off." For the first occurrence of the term, the translator opted for the coarse word "vaffanculo" (fuck off) but in its shorter form "fanculo." This choice allowed the translation to maintain the vulgar register of the original, while also adopting a common variation of the term, similar to what happens in the ST.

Shortly after, the same character adds: "走路就走路！滑什麼手機啊！" (Zoulu jiu zoulu! Hua shenme shouji a!; literal trans. "Walk-then-walk-interjection! Scroll-what-phone-interjection!") and continues with "掯！白目！" (Ken! Baimu!; literal trans. "Fuck! White-eye!"). Considering the aggressive tone of the interlocutor, confirmed also by the images and the shape of the balloons, the two lines in Italian became: "Guarda dove vai, con quel cazzo di cellulare in mano!" (Watch where you go, with that fucking phone!) and "Vaffanculo! Idiota!" (Fuck off! Idiot!). Thus, the translator adopted what Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002, 510) describe as modulation meaning a shift in perspective, cognitive category, or focal point of the expression. Specifically, the idea of looking at the phone was shifted to looking at the road. The vulgar value of *ken* was then reinforced by translating *baimu*, which means "distracted," as "idiot." This was done for two reasons: the first is that the idea of Ah-Chieh being absent-minded was already conveyed in the previous line ("Watch where you're going") and thus did

[10] "calarsi nel linguaggio del film, capire qual è la 'lingua' del film, quali sono le strategie comunicative scelte dai personaggi, qual è la varietà della lingua – quello che in linguistica viene detto il 'registro' – personaggio per personaggio e situazione per situazione, quindi scegliere le varietà, i 'registri paralleli' da usare nella lingua di arrivo."

not need to be repeated; the second is that, unlike the Chinese *baimu*, the Italian "distratto" (distracted) does not carry an insulting connotation.

Figure 11. *Railway Sonata*, 13

5. Conclusions

This study, after setting the context for Taiwanese comics, investigated the challenges of translating Chinese *manhua* through the case of *Railway Sonata* and its Italian version. Drawing mainly on translation theories by Kaindl (1999; 2010) and Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002), it focused on three types of messages: those tied to images, those with sociocultural content, and those marked by orality.

The findings revealed that Kaindl's (2010, 38) notion of treating easily editable texts differently does not apply to *Railway Sonata*. Here, the prevalent technique is repetitio + adiectio, where the original language and script are retained in the translation, with additional notes inside or outside the panels. For culture-specific items, strategies varied: personal names were transliterated using a modified Wade-Giles system, while place names followed island-specific transcriptions. Material culture terms were translated using descriptions or coined equivalents. However, prioritizing readability sometimes led to the loss of Taiwanese nuances. Address terms were generalized in non-familial contexts and omitted when used as a first-

person singular pronoun. As far as orality is concerned, the translator often used modulation, adapting the original text to maintain colloquial tone and naturalness in Italian.

In conclusion, while this exploratory study offers valuable insights and marks a significant step towards understanding the translation of Sinophone comics into Italian, it is far from being exhaustive. The growing field of Chinese-to-Italian comic translations warrants more comprehensive research. There is a noticeable surge in the translation of Sinophone comics, particularly in Italy, a trend attributable to both the increasing governmental support from Taiwan and a rising interest in alternative Asian comics outside the mainstream focus on manga. Despite this growth, there is a marked absence of systematic studies addressing the specific techniques and challenges of comic translations from Chinese. To ensure the results of this study are not merely anecdotal, future research should expand on the themes explored here, incorporating a broader selection of works for analysis. It is essential to examine more *manhua* by various authors and translators, thereby contributing to the developing area of Chinese-to-Italian comic translations and addressing the gaps identified in both editorial translation research and translator training, as well as the specific field of graphic narrative translation.

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