

A forgotten piece of Italian sinology

Amedeo Cracco's *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (1951)

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This article deals with *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (1951) by Amedeo Cracco O.F.M., one of the earliest comprehensive grammars of Chinese published in Italian. Rapidly fallen into oblivion due to the general hostility of Italian sinologists towards its “unorthodox” approach to many problems of Chinese linguistics, Cracco’s grammar is nonetheless worthy of recognition for its original mix of archaisms and innovations. While Cracco’s commitment to a five-tone variety of Mandarin and the Latin grammatical framework can be mentioned for the former, his emphasis on the polysyllabism of Modern Chinese and new categories borrowed from the latest generation of Chinese grammarians make good examples of the latter. Presenting *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* in its historical and epistemological background, the article aims at retrieving the memory of a forgotten piece of Italian sinology.

Keywords: Chinese grammar; Italian sinology; missionary linguistics; history of linguistics.

1. Introduction

Composed in Rome for Edizioni dell’Ateneo, *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (1951) by Amedeo Cracco O.F.M. (1903-1970) is the first proper reference grammar of Chinese published in Italy.¹ Less than three hundred pages of typewritten text interrupted by hand-drawn Chinese characters, in which the author, Italy’s last missionary linguist, set out to methodically expose the Chinese language “for Italians, especially for missionaries... who are satisfied with the knowledge they gain from the purely mnemonic study of words, phrases and expressions” (Cracco 1951: 5-6). Without departing from the traditional (Latin) grammatical categories, Cracco tried to introduce the Italian public to a series of topics that were being debated in China at that time: such as the distinction between “words” and

¹ By “reference grammar,” I refer to a prose-like description of the major grammatical structures in a language, designed as a reference tool for finding specific details of the language. A reference grammar is distinct from a “pedagogical grammar” designed for teaching language usage through exercises. Before Cracco, other Italian authors had written about Chinese grammar, but their works were primarily pedagogical grammars, such as those from Naples’ Collegio dei Cinesi described in Castorina (2014), or were only partially published, such as Severini’s draft described in Paternicò (2019).

“characters,” the definition of the parts of speech, and—rigorously detached from its political implications—the question of “national pronunciation.”

Despite being the most comprehensive work of its genre published in Italy up to that time, Cracco’s grammar was destined for a rapid descent into oblivion. Neither the book nor its author is indeed mentioned in most research on the history of Chinese language studies in Italy, especially Antonucci and Zuccheri (2010), nor in historical overviews of Italian sinology in general, such as Bertuccioli (1995) and Lanciotti (1995). Preventing Cracco from entering the history of Italian sinology was likely a feud with F. Pasquale D’Elia (1890-1963), who at the end of World War II was the only active professor of Chinese in Italy (Antonucci and Zuccheri 2010: 32). In a harsh exchange of views on the Chinese language during 1956-1957, D’Elia attacked Cracco’s deviation from the traditional pedagogical model of Italian sinology, based on memorising characters and phrases, and labelled his Chinese grammar “a contrived and artificial superstructure [that is] but a house of cards” (D’Elia 1956: 529), therefore barring it from playing any role in fostering the new generation of Italian sinologists.² Relying on archival and bibliographic sources,³ the present paper is dedicated to restoring the memory of a forgotten piece of Italian sinology, with its curious mix of novel and obsolescent features, and the scholarly debate it aroused, which witnesses to classical prejudices about the Chinese language surviving in Italy well into the mid-20th Century.

2. In the wake of tradition

Cracco remains to date a relatively obscure figure in the history of Italian sinology. Native of Vicenza, in Veneto, he entered the Franciscan order in 1926 and was ordained priest in 1927; in the 1930-40s he served as a missionary in China, most notably in the post of superior regular for the Diocese of Sanyuan 三原 and warden of the Tungyüenfang (Tongyuanfang) 通遠坊 minor seminary in Gaoling 高陵, a suburb of Xi’an 西安, until the newly established communist government expelled him after 19 years

² Federico Masini has recently retrieved the records of Vacca and D’Elia’s Chinese language classes at Sapienza University of Rome for an article on Giuliano Bertuccioli’s training as a sinologist. These records indicate that during the 1940s, the traditional method was still being practised, with the primary textbook being Zottoli’s five-volume *Cursus Litteraturae Sinicae* (Shanghai: 1879-1882). The classes focused on analysing and translating excerpts from classical literature, with the teacher providing usage notes for important grammatical structures and cultural and historical concepts.

³ I am grateful to my friends and colleagues, Emanuele Raini (University of Naples “L’Orientale”) and Timon Gatta (“Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore,” Milan), for their invaluable assistance in obtaining materials necessary for this paper.

of missionary activity.⁴ During his stay in China, Cracco was an attentive witness to the significant changes that the Chinese language was undergoing since the end of the Empire and the decline of traditional Chinese culture, as well as to the political vicissitudes which accompanied such transformation. Besides learning Chinese for his pastoral duties, he also did scholarly research into the history and current events of the Catholic Church in China, as reflected in his earliest publications. Despite being a marginal presence in the history of Italian sinology, Cracco is therefore fully qualified as a sinologist due to his first-hand knowledge of China and his competence in the Chinese language (Bertuccioli 1995: 72).

A prolific writer, Cracco published a series of books in Latin and Italian on geography, missiology, apologetics, and hagiography. His bibliography counts about a dozen works published between 1933 and 1964, of which seven dedicated to China and the Catholic Church in China are listed in D’Arelli (2007: 203, 299).⁵ *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna*, Cracco’s only major work in linguistics, was purportedly compiled in Rome during the year 1949 (D’Elia 1956: 530), as further indicated by the—highly symbolic—date of 25 September 1949 for the author’s foreword (Cracco 1951: 10). The book was also printed in Rome, in July 1951, by Edizioni dell’Ateneo, a local publishing house linked to Sapienza University of Rome.⁶ By the late 1950s, Cracco had admittedly prepared a second edition, which was never published (Cracco 1957: 109). Come to light among the hardships of Italy’s post-war period, this only edition of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* looks more like a hastily-made piece of handicraft than a full-fledged academic publication due to its typewritten Italian text dotted with quivering Chinese characters penned by the author himself—who had not been able to find a Chinese to do the task (D’Elia 1956, 530). Unlike contemporary works labelled as “grammars,” most distinctly Gonzalez-Alvarez A. (1928), Cracco’s *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* is a proper reference grammar and not an annotated anthology of Chinese language texts:

⁴ Biographical information on F. Amedeo Cracco is scarce in scholarly literature. Despite his prolonged missionary activity, he does not yet have an entry in the monumental *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*. The information given here is sourced from Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (2023). See also the biographical note in *De seminariorum sinensium institutione* (s.n. 1949, 651).

⁵ Listed in D’Arelli (2007, 203, 299) are: *La prefettura apostolica di Sanyüan, China, Shensi* (Tsinanfu: 1933); *Missionarium Shensinensium lapideae inscriptiones* (T’ai-yuen-fu: 1940); *De seminariorum sinensium institutione* (Shanghai: 1946); *I missionari della Cina nella statistica* (Shanghai: s.d. [1935]); *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (Roma: 1952 [1951]), *Testimoni di Cristo nella Cina d’oggi* (Padova: 1956); “La lingua cinese moderna è monosillabica o polisillabica?” (1957).

⁶ Although the involvement of Edizioni dell’Ateneo in publishing Cracco’s grammar would suggest a link with Sapienza University of Rome, a query for “Cracco, Amedeo” submitted by me to the central archives of Sapienza University of Rome in Autumn 2021 gave no results. However, since Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984) donated Cracco’s books to Rome’s Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, it is likely that he was the one who introduced Cracco to the publishing house.

Over the last decades, Chinese sinologists (*sic*) have begun to study the logical form of their language [...]. It seemed helpful to me [...] to methodically expose the most important of these results; convinced that the study of the language, conducted only with the methods in use, does not provide that mastery of Chinese that is constructive; that is to say, such as to detach oneself from the forms learnt by heart [...] However, most people do not feel, at least up to the present, the need to know the grammatical and logical structure of the Chinese language, satisfied with the knowledge they draw from the study [...] of sentences and expressions (Cracco 1951: 5-6)

Cracco's grammar strictly adheres to the conventional structure and categories of Latin grammar that were widely known to educated Italians of his time, especially those who had attended grammar schools (*licei*) or minor seminaries.⁷ Preceded by a short introduction (Cracco 1951: 5-8), the grammar is divided into three parts: "The Word" (*La Parola*), where, after a few preliminary remarks, the nine parts of speech are introduced with a particular focus on their composition (*ibid.*, 11-135); "The Clause" (*La Proposizione*), dedicated to the structure of simple clauses (Cracco 1951: 137-204); "The Sentence" (*il Periodo*), covering the syntax of (complex) sentences and logical analysis as treated by the Chinese grammarians (Cracco 1951: 205-249). These three chapters end with a few reading, translation, and composition exercises. Closing the work is a list of Chinese grammatical terms translated into Italian (Cracco 1951: 250-256) and an index to commonly used characters found in the Grammar (Cracco 1951: 257-266).

The nine parts of speech named in the Grammar, in Italian and Chinese, are: noun (*nome, mingci* 名詞); adjective (*aggettivo, xingrongci* 形容詞); pronoun (*pronome, daimingci* 代名詞); verb (*verbo, dongci* 動詞); adverb (*avverbio, fuci* 副詞); preposition (*proposizione, jieci* 介詞); conjunction (*congiunzione, lianci* 連詞); pleonasm (*pleonasma, zhuci* 助詞); interjection (*interiezione, tanci* 歎詞). No theoretical definition is ever given, and the parts of speech are intended contrastively with Italian—e.g., resultative verbs used as degree and result complements are called "adverbs" despite their explicit verbal nature because they translate into Italian adverbs (Cracco 1951: 100-103)—or Latin—e.g., "classifiers" or "measure words" (*classifiche, liangci* 量詞) are treated as adjectives along with the numerals (Cracco 1951: 57-61). Throughout the history of missionary linguistics, there have been many examples of forcing exotic elements into European grammatical categories; the continuation of this practice by Italy's sinological community until the mid-20th century indicates their conservative posture.

⁷ A fair impression of this system can be obtained from Rocci's *Grammatica greca* (Roma 1908), which many Italian students have learned Greek grammar in *liceo classico* ("grammar school").

From this point of view, the Chinese noun is said to possess the two categories of gender—only relevant when the noun “designates living beings: people, animals, plants,” where, as in Italian, “two genders can be distinguished: male [*yanglei*] 陽類 and female [*yinlei*] 陰類” (Cracco 1951: 39)— and number—for “a noun can be singular or plural depending on the context, or whether it is specified by specific determinatives (*determinative*), that may be: adjectives [...], numerals [...], pronouns [...]” (Cracco 1951: 41), or by placing the “unaccented” suffix *men* 們 after a noun, or by reduplicating it, in which case the totality of a species must be understood (Cracco 1951: 42).

As for adjective morphology, much attention is paid to the rules regulating the use of the adjective “desinence or suffix” (*desinenza o suffisso*) *de* 的 (Cracco 1951: 53-55). The convention adopted looks quite effective in its simplicity: Monosyllabic adjectives “if accompanied by their noun, always repel the suffix [*de*] 的;” Polysyllabic adjectives “can all receive the suffix, which in the clause is often understood” [i.e., omitted]; while reduplicated monosyllabic adjectives are always marked with *de* 的. Consistently with the classical grammatical framework, much more attention is dedicated to comparison, i.e. to the “grades of the adjective” (*gradi dell’aggettivo, biji xingrongci* 比級形容詞, which are those found in Latin or Italian: the “positive” (*grado positivo, ping biji* 平比級), the “comparative” (*grado comparativo, cha biji* 差比級), and the “superlative grade” (*ji biji* 極比級), all but the former expressed by certain particles juxtaposed to the adjective (Cracco 1951: 55-57).

The verb, on the other hand, is said to possess a full conjugation by mood, tense, and person, “if by conjugation we mean the various modifications of an action in the way it is performed, in tense, number and person” (Cracco 1951: 89), which can be deduced from accompanying words. Thus, Chinese has three tenses: “present” (*presente, xianzai shi* 過去時), “perfect” (*perfetto, guoqu shi* 過去時) and “future” (*futuro, weilai shi* 未來時), plus the others also found in Italian—“present perfect” (*passato prossimo*), “imperfect” (*imperfetto*), “past perfect” (*piuccheperfetto*). There are the same six moods as in Latin: “indicative” (*indicativo*); “subjunctive” (*congiuntivo*); “imperative” (*imperativo*); “infinitive” (*infinito*); “present participle” (*participio presente*); “past participle” (*participio passato*) (Cracco 1951: 90-94).

Finally, syntax is analysed according to the specific categories of Latin grammar, starting from clause components (subject, predicate, attribute, and complements) (Cracco 1951: 142-192), passing on to clause types (Cracco 1951: 193-199), and logical analysis (*analisi logica, tujiefu* 圖解法 “explanation through pictures;” Cracco 1951: 201-204), and concluding with the syntax of complex sentences (Cracco 1951: 205-245). The most notable feature of this section, so clad in the spirit and practical terminology of classical language pedagogy, is the “diagrams of logical analysis” twice included (Cracco 1951: 202-204; 243-245) to show “the method of Chinese grammarians” (Cracco 1951: 243). A little part of this 272-

page book, the diagrams are substantial evidence that Cracco was at least familiar with Li Jinxi (1924), who introduced the concept of logical analysis in the Chinese grammatical tradition. Li Jinxi presents this “explanation through pictures” (*tujiefa* 圖解法), i.e. logical analysis, at the beginning of his work, and resorts to it diffusely. A more attentive look at the work also reveals that a substantial part of the Chinese grammatical terminology sparsely employed by Cracco is borrowed from Li Jinxi.⁸

3. Witness to a changing language

The language described in *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* is a form of vernacular Chinese (*Baihua* 白話) characterised by most of the grammatical and lexical features of Mandarin Chinese also included in the contemporary National Language (*Guoyu* 國語 “National Language”) and the standard adopted by the People’s Republic of China after just a few years (*Putonghua* 普通話 “Common Language”).⁹ This language is contrasted both to the “great variety” of spoken forms (*passim*) and to the literary language (*Wenyan* 文言)—“the privilege of a few,” which until recently “had a culture and development that made it inaccessible to most people” (Cracco 1951: 27). Elements of the latter are, in effect, limited to flavoured words and expressions also employed in the cultured spoken language of the time—e.g., the particles *zhi* 之, *ye* 也, *xu* 許, labelled *pleonasm* “pleonasms” in Italian (Cracco 1951: 194).

Compared to contemporary *Guoyu* 國語, however, Cracco’s Chinese is notable for a series of archaisms, especially in its phonology. At a time when the long-running debate on standard pronunciation had been resolved *de jure* in favour of the four-tone system of northern Mandarin,¹⁰ Cracco does manifestly stick to the “mandarinal pronunciation” (*pronuncia mandarinale*) of old—that is, the *Guanhua* 官話 of the late Empire—with its five-tone system. From among Cracco’s sources, a five-tone system is most notably used by Valle in both his coursebook (Valle 1949: 24-26) and dictionary (Valle 1948: iii); notice that the latter remained the only one available to the Italian public until the early 2000s (Lanciotti 1995: 81). However, it must be said that the phonology and internal structure of

⁸ Most notably, the category of “attribute” (*fujiaoyu* 附加語), although its use in Cracco (1951) is restricted to nouns used as modifiers of other nouns.

⁹ That is Modern Standard Mandarin, defined in 1956 as “the standard form of Modern Chinese with the Beijing phonological system as its norm of pronunciation, Northern dialects as its base dialect, and looking to exemplary modern works in *Baihua* ‘vernacular literary language’ for its grammatical norms.”

¹⁰ For an historical synthesis of the standardisation of modern Chinese on a northern dialectal base between the 19th and the 20th centuries, see Van Ness Simmons (2020) and Söderblom Saarela (2020).

the Chinese syllable are not dealt with in detail; after a few remarks on “the pronunciation of Chinese characters” (Cracco 1951: 16-18), “the tones” (Cracco 1951: 18-22) and “the method of transcription” (Cracco 1951: 22-25), the author deals immediately with the word as the basic unit of the language. The reason could be that the author lacked a theoretical understanding of the problem or that the classical European grammatical model he conforms to does not leave much space for phonology. In any case, Cracco’s stated reason to go against the tide would have seemed, in hindsight, somewhat naïve:

Although Beijing pronunciation is now prescriptive, we also deem it more useful and convenient to learn the mandarinal pronunciation (*pronuncia mandarinale*), whose monosyllabic sounds are more than twice as many as that: this property is fundamental and decisive for the future of the language (Cracco 1951: 18).

In practice, tones are no obstacle: Cracco limits himself to reporting that “most people admit five of them [...]. The first and fifth tones often cannot be distinguished, which explains the present tendency to admit only four tones, as are found in the speech of Beijing;” in any case, they “cannot be learned but from the live voice of the teacher” (Cracco 1951: 20-21). Pronunciation is also seldom indicated in the examples, except *passim* throughout the first chapter (Cracco 1951: 16-25), despite the fair amount of attention paid to native systems of phonetic notation.¹¹ After all, articulating the tone clearly

is necessary when pronouncing a character [...] in isolation; it is generally necessary for sentences [made up] of characters that in themselves are also words [...], but it is generally not necessary in words composed of several syllables and [longer] clauses, only in the most important word (Cracco 1951: 21-22).

Cracco’s implicit overlook of contemporary normative *Guoyu* 國語 also shows from the brief mention of *Guoyin Zimu* 國音字母 as an alphabet based on pure Beijing pronunciation adopted “with the not too distant aim of replacing the characters” (Cracco 1951: 22). The system shown in the following tables, along with equivalences to *Gwoyue Romatzyh* 國語羅馬字 is, however, an earlier form of it, including initials *ng* 兀, *gn* 广, and *v* 万—remnants of the Old National Pronunciation (*Lao Guoyin* 老國音), based on a synthesis of northern and southern Mandarin. Rather than *Gwoyue Romatzyh*, Cracco makes use of a peculiar Italian Romanisation of Chinese, which looks like an adaptation of the French EFEO system

¹¹ Cracco admittedly planned to add a complete transcription to the second edition of his grammar he had prepared by the late 1950s, although it could not be published (Cracco 1957: 109).

(e.g., It. *tciong* vs EFEO *tchong* for *zhong* 重) or Wade-Giles (e.g., It. *cheng* vs WG *keng* for *geng* 更): a similar if not the same Romanisation is also used by Valle.¹²

Nonetheless, many innovative elements in *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* testify to the author's knowledge of the latest advancements in grammatical studies in China. For example, Cracco shows to have developed, along with his Chinese contemporaries, a sense of the distinction to be made between characters (*carattere*; *zi* 字) and words (*parola*; *ci* 詞), basing his morphology on the assumption that polysyllabism is a distinctive feature of the modern language (*Guoyu* 國語) as opposed to the old literary medium (*Wenyan* 文言):

The word is the character, or union of several characters, expressing an idea. In words, one does not look at the character or its monosyllabic nature, but at the meaning, which responds to a logical unity. Consequently, an idea can be expressed with a single character or with the logical union of several characters. In this case, the pronunciation is also one, forming a phonetic unit and, therefore, a grammatical unit. (Cracco 1951: 25)

Here is an apparent reference to Li Jinxi (1924), which reads

A character is one of the “characters” [taken] individually. A word is one of the “words” which, in speech, express one object of thought. Sometimes a character is a word [...]. Sometimes two or more characters are needed to combine to make a word. In grammar, the word serves as the basic unit to distinguish among parts of speech. No matter whether they are [made of] one or a few characters, as long as they express a single concept, they can be called a word¹³ (Li Jinxi 1924: 2-3).

The reason why Chinese has long been thought to be a monosyllabic language, Cracco suggests, is that in writing, every character looks like a unit in itself, whereas the reader must rely on his instinct to combine them into spoken words; nonetheless

writing cannot be the fundamental reason that distinguishes languages into monosyllabic and polysyllabic, but their phonetic expression. The Chinese language, in its current phase, is a polysyllabic language (Cracco 1951: 26).

¹² Valle himself explains in the introduction to his dictionary that his Romanisation is a version of the EFEO system adjusted to Italian orthography: “The pronunciation used in this dictionary [...] is that of Debesse [used, e.g., in Debesse 1901], redressed in an Italian form [...]. Thus, K is replaced by C and CH; J, TC, TS are maintained; and SH is employed when, in front of the vowels A, O, [and] U, one must pronounce an Italian SC with the same value that it has before the vowels E, I” (Valle 1948: iii).

¹³ 字就是一個一個的“單詞”。詞就是說話的時候表示一個觀念的“詞語”[...]。有時要兩個字以上組合起來才成功一個詞[...]。文法中分別此類，是把詞作單位；不問他是一個字或是幾個字，只要是表示一個觀念的，便叫作詞。

According to Cracco, polysyllabism in modern Chinese is the result of different characters, either “specifying” (*specificativi*) or “synonymous” (*sinonimi*), being combined as prefixes (*citou* 詞頭) or suffixes (*ciwei* 詞尾) with a base word or character to expand or restrict its meaning (Cracco 1951: 28). In Cracco’s opinion, Chinese even has a complete set of derivational inflections closely resembling those found in Italian, as the existence of a distinct nominal morphology in any language is “a requirement of thought, which needs, in order to perfect itself, signs or syllables that manifest the different variations of one concept” (Cracco 1951: 29).¹⁴ Cracco’s insistence on this point, which would eventually trigger the quarrel with D’Elia, must be understood against the backdrop of Italy’s intellectual culture of the 1930-40s. The idea that Chinese is a monosyllabic and purely isolating language, inherited by 19th-century linguistics, was still commonly held at that time, as is shown by the many mentions of it in De Filippi *et al.* (1931: 303-306), that is the section on the Chinese language under the entry “Cina” in the authoritative *Enciclopedia italiana*, edited by Giovanni Vacca (1872-1953), complete with a basic bibliography.¹⁵ In any case, Cracco’s distinction between “specifying” or “synonymous” and “base” characters is notably similar and almost contemporary with the distinction of “free” and “bound words” found in Chao (1947: 33-34).

Cracco’s reference list is essential for understanding where this significant innovation comes from. His sources include a series of Chinese grammars published between 1921 and 1947, the most recent of which are Li Jinxi (1947) and Wang Li (1947). It is to these two, and especially the latter, that Cracco probably owes the distinction in concept between characters and words. Note also that *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* bears in its title an implicit reference to Wang Li (1947), whose Chinese title *Zhongguo xiandai yufa* 中國現代語法 is printed on its cover. None of the Western-language manuals and anthologies included in Cracco’s bibliography delves to the same extent into the distinction between character and word. From among the Italian-language bibliography, Valle (1949:

¹⁴ In the history of Italian sinology, a similar concept had already been expressed by Antelmo Severini (1828-1909) in a draft book named *Elementi di grammatica cinese* (“Elements of Chinese grammar”), of which only the first 21 pages were published in 1865. Although Severini also suggests that “in every language, but mostly in Chinese, the words change quality and nature, or better to say, switch from one grammatical category into another, according to the different use that they have in the clause” (quoted in Paternicò 2019: 129), it is unlikely that Cracco was influenced by Severini’s work, as it was not available until long after 1949.

¹⁵ Besides Wiegner’s *Chinois écrit* (Sienhsien [Xianxian]: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 3rd ed. 1922), the three grammars included in the bibliography are Prémare’s *Notitia linguae sinicae* (Malacca: Academia Anglo-Sinensis, 1730), Abel-Rémusat’s *Grammaire chinoise* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1822), and Julien’s *Syntaxe nouvelle de la langue chinoise* (Parigi: Librairie de Maisonneuve, 1869-1870).

11-44) and Gonzalez-Alvarez (1928) are the most likely sources of the notions of Chinese grammar,¹⁶ while Bortone (1935) can only be the source of a few notions on the “national transcription” (*trascrizione nazionale*, i.e., *Zhuyin zimu* 注音字母) (Cracco 1951: 22-24). Other works in Western languages in Cracco’s bibliography, most notably Gasperment (1925), are also mostly concerned with the old *Guanhua* 官話 and can be held accountable for the phonological archaisms of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna*. However, these archaisms, which would become more and more accentuated into the 1950s as language standardisation went on, seem to have attracted little or no attention. Ironically, it is that innovative discourse on polysyllabism that would become the object of heated debates soon after that.

4. “A cluster of stones does not make a house”

The doyen of Italy’s sinologists, Pasquale D’Elia, was soon to stumble upon Cracco’s insistence on considering Chinese a polysyllabic language. Italy’s first comprehensive grammar of Chinese could not contradict at its essence what most Italian sinologists had up to then held to be true, which was to compromise its potential as a teaching instrument. Chinese language teaching was at that time still heavily dependent on a character-based approach dating back to early Jesuit linguistics. Foreign languages had to be taught according to the classical pedagogical model, which postulated learning vocabulary and grammar through translation exercises and mnemonics. Only exceptions to rules were thought to need a proper grammatical explanation. Defending the traditional method required demolishing Cracco’s proposition from its foundations, and D’Elia tempestively set himself to work on this task. His response, prepared soon after the publication of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (Cracco 1957: 102), was published on *Monumenta Serica* in 1956 in the format of a book review (D’Elia 1956). D’Elia claimed that Cracco’s fundamental mistake had been presuming that the Chinese language has a grammar at all:

Until a few years ago, it was common to say that there is no Chinese grammar. Indeed, since it is a monosyllabic language, with no possible inflection, hence no possibility of declensions or conjugations, it is hard to see what exactly this grammar could consist of, at least for the morphological part. Adding a prefix or suffix to a syllable is already leaving aside the

¹⁶ Valle (1949) and Gonzalez-Alvarez (1928) are not comprehensive grammars but anthologies of Chinese texts and sayings with a grammatical commentary. The language described in both works is a variety of Southern Mandarin with five tones. Notice that Gonzalez-Alvarez (1928) is of little help if phonology is concerned; moreover, this book is a translation from Spanish into Italian made by F. Cosma Sartori (1890-1957) as a source of samples of Chinese rhetoric. See Casalin (2013).

monosyllabism (*monosillabicità*) of the language. Who modifies a syllable, furthermore, changes it into another one that is no longer the former (D’Elia 1956: 528).

Clad in a mix of compliments and cutting remarks, this was a severe attack on Cracco’s pretence to write a grammar of Chinese. D’Elia blames such a posture on the desire of certain Chinese intellectuals to emulate the great powers, leading them to imitate their social, political, economic, and cultural institutions. Attempts since 1917 to substitute the “spoken language, almost current” [*baihua* 白話] for the classical language, holds D’Elia, are the product of this drive to emulate the linguistic institutions of the Western powers, which also implied adopting the Latin alphabet. Despite Cracco’s claims, however, time is yet to show whether such attempts at “Europeanising” the grammar of Chinese will turn out to be fruitful or whether “this whole artificial and contrived superstructure is nothing but a house of cards” (D’Elia 1956: 529).

To disprove Cracco’s claims that this form of the Chinese language is polysyllabic, D’Elia moves to analyse the expression *Tianzhujiao shi zhigong de* 天主教是至公的 “Christianism [i.e. ‘Catholicism’] is the most universal” (*La religione cristiana è universalissima*), given by Cracco (1951: 26) to illustrate his thesis. Analysing the phrase as containing three words, Cracco is said to have fallen into an error that led him straight to considering Chinese “a language close to Latin or Anglo-Saxon languages” (Cracco 1951: 26), “[an] agglutinating language” (Cracco 1951: 29), where even “noun gender and number, verb conjugation, subordinate clauses, logical and grammatical analysis, and many other fine things found in Western grammars” can also be found (D’Elia 1956: 529). In fact, continues D’Elia, the exact phrase can be translated into Latin “literally and *ad verbum*” as *Coeli Domini religio est valde communis* (“The Lord of Heaven’s religion is very common”)—thus, with a 1:1 character per word ratio, “to the exception of the last character, which indicates that what comes before is an adjective” (*sic*; Cracco 1951: 529). D’Elia, while challenging Cracco to compile a grammar of the classical language as well, concludes that

while remaining monosyllabic, [modern Chinese] makes use of synonyms, antonyms, and specifiers, words that dilute the meaning of the monosyllables and that, while retaining their meaning, can be translated into Western languages with a shorter number of words. This agglomeration of monosyllables, which can correspond to a single Western word, is called “word” [yu] 語 by modern Chinese grammarians as opposed to “character” [zi] 字, which is still a monosyllable, and which until yesterday was synonymous with “word”—each character being a word, for it has a meaning of its own. [...] *So far so good!*¹⁷ But let us not forget that even today, the Chinese language remains what it is and that just as a cluster of stones does not make a house,

¹⁷ In English in the original.

neither does an agglomeration of monosyllables make a language polysyllabic (D'Elia 1956: 528-529).

“A cluster of stones does not make a house.” Punched by this line, the following year, Cracco replied to D'Elia from the pages of the Franciscan periodical *Le Venezie francescane*—interestingly, not a journal of sinology. In the article, Cracco affirms that D'Elia is not the only sinologist who does erroneously believe that modern Chinese, often thought to be the same as the classical language, is still a monosyllabic language: Valle (1949), Bortone (1935), Gasperment (1925) and most foreign missionaries in China, as well as the *Enciclopedia italiana* (De Filippi *et al.* 1931: 303-306), all stick to this opinion regardless of the steady change towards a polysyllabic language that Chinese had ostensibly undertaken since 1917 (Cracco 1957: 103). Such misunderstanding arises because the character continues to be the basic graphic unit (*unità fondamentale della grafia*) of modern Chinese:

Modern sinologists, like all foreign missionaries, have stuck to the unity of the ideographic character, maintaining the historical conviction of the monosyllabism of the language, even of the modern one. Here, in short, has occurred the fact, far from rare, that we also note in opinions of other kinds: *the persistence of appearances keeps alive a convention that has been superseded in substance, which may have changed or has been deepened by new studies: the Sun, for... many people, still revolves around the Earth* (Cracco 1957: 103; my italics).

For Cracco, all languages have gone through three phases during their evolution, that is:

1. The “ideological phase” (*fase ideologica*), when “unitary” words are coined for simple ideas conceived by the mind;
2. The “vocal phase” (*fase vocale*), when the different sounds in the language are consciously and orderly organised to bear specific semantic content, by which grammatical inflection emerges;
3. The “written phase” (*fase della scrittura*), when written signs are invented to ease the exchange of ideas and concepts. Now, since it is not but arbitrarily bound to the semantic or phonetic features of a particular language, a writing system cannot offer substantial evidence on whether a language is monosyllabic or polysyllabic—apart from languages written with a phonetic script, where, due to the strict relation between sound and writing, the phonetic structure shows through the written superstructure (Cracco 1957: 103-105).

Cracco openly rejects the idea that the Chinese language is a cluster of stones, used by D'Elia to discredit his sketch of Chinese grammar by trying to translate “literally and *ad verbum*” the phrase *Tianzhujiao shi zhigong de* 天主教是至公的 “Catholicism is very common:”

Do you not feel, Father, the *in-re* contradiction of these two terms? In Chinese, we only have characters, not letters or terms (*ad verbum*), elements that are exclusive to speaking and not to the ideographic script—[D’Elia] makes an effort to translate character by character, in which we sense the method used in elementary lectures of the language, where didactics demands this procedure (Cracco 1957: 106).

4. Conclusions

If we were to assess the impact of Cracco’s grammar on the development of Chinese linguistics in Italy from its diffusion, our judgement would not be a positive one. *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* had relatively little circulation and seemed destined for rapid obsolescence. Not only due to the open hostility of D’Elia, then Italy’s only professor of Chinese, but also because Cracco missed his predictions on how Chinese would have further developed: a failure already visible only a few years after its publication. At the same time as D’Elia and Cracco eagerly exchanged their views in 1956-57, the last major reform of Written Chinese was being enacted in the People’s Republic of China. Beijing pronunciation was established by law as the basis of China’s Common Language (*Putonghua* 普通話), the promulgation of *Hanyu pinyin fang’an* (1956) put an end to the debate on Romanisation, and the first character simplification dissipated hopes that the Chinese language reform would end up in a full alphabetisation.

Despite some naivety that could have been filed off with experience, Cracco’s work could have played some role in the rebirth of Italian sinology after its post-war depression, but the story went differently. Cracco never published the second edition of his grammar, which he had admittedly prepared in 1957. He also did not take on the challenge from D’Elia to compile the grammar of the classical language. At that time, Italian sinology was at its lowest and still too much attached to the traditional philological approach to Chinese language teaching to feel any urge to deal with the “chemistry of the language.”¹⁸ After all, Grammar, as any other literary genre, cannot ignore its duty: to please the taste of the public whom it targets. As Cracco shifted his focus to missiology and hagiography, the extant copies of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* ended up catching dust on the bookshelves of Chinese language schools or being sold at second-hand book stands. The first comprehensive grammar of Chinese published in Italy and the fierce debate aroused by its publication have thus faded into obscurity.

¹⁸ Federico Masini once told me that Giuliano Bertuccioli has used this phrase to label the object of his studies in Chinese linguistics.

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