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Chesterman, Andrew Peter Clement

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Book Review

Contact information:

Andrew P. C. Chesterman, andrew.chesterman@helsinki.fi

Esmail Haddadian-Moghaddam, *Literary Translation in Modern Iran: A Sociological Study*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2014. [Benjamins Translation Library vol. 114.] ISBN 978 90 272 5854 0 (Hb), 978 90 272 6939 3 (Eb). 236pp.

This study breaks new ground in surveying the history of literary translation in Iran. It aims to “describe and explore the agency of translators and publishers” (p. 175) in a particular historical and geographical context. At the same time, it sheds light on Iran’s cultural development over the past two centuries, and its changing relationship to modernity. It brings together a great deal of historical and cultural information, and also contributes to the current debate in Translation Studies about how best to study agency. It has clearly been quite a challenge to assemble all the information, much of which is not easily available, and the author’s resourcefulness has been admirable. The study shows the value of patient fieldwork over several years.

The book opens with an introductory chapter on the theoretical and methodological background of the research. This places the study within the relatively new branch of translation sociology, which focuses on people (translators, publishers etc.) rather than texts, and outlines some of Bourdieu’s central concepts which will be used in the analysis: field, habitus, and capital. The discussion of agency is interesting: several different definitions and models, from both sociology and Translation Studies, are compared and criticized. Some of the critical points made can be challenged. It is not actually the case, for instance, that Paloposki’s model, which focuses on the textual, paratextual and extratextual manifestations of a translator’s agency, omits the addition of footnotes as a sign of a translator’s agency (p. 23). Her mention of “notes” obviously includes footnotes.

Haddadian-Moghaddam’s own model of agency (illustrated on p. 27) aims to make explicit some of the factors that are only implicit in some other analyses: the actual decision to act (who makes what decision?), the agent’s motivation to act, and the contextual constraints or encouragements that affect a decision to act in a given way. These factors relate directly to his three research questions (listed on p. 4). The author argues that his model of agency goes beyond Kinnunen and Koskinen’s definition of agency as “willingness and ability to act” (2010: 6), a definition that is often cited in translation sociology. I rather see this definition as a useful general one, which leaves kinds of motivation (cf. “willingness”), actual decisions and their contexts (cf. “ability”) to be specified at a more concrete analytical level. Some of the details of the author’s agency model may be less persuasive than others (“meta-title” is perhaps not a good term for the category it labels: “production process” might be better), but it will be interesting to see how other translation scholars react to it and perhaps refine it further.

The introduction then outlines the structure of the work, as a series of case studies presented in order of their historical contexts. These studies, seven of them, are of very different kinds. One wonders what the author’s definition of a case study is: several relevant methodological

sources are mentioned (such as Susam-Sarajeva 2009), but not made much use of. One of the studies is in fact a survey. The concept of a case study would have deserved more discussion. The focus of all the studies – and of this book as a whole – is said to be on literary translation into Persian from English. However, more attention could have been given to the fact that of the four studies on individual translations, two concern indirect translations, where English has not been the language of the original work but the mediating language. The text does not always make this clear.

Chapter 2 will be helpful to readers (such as myself) who have only a superficial knowledge of Iranian history. The periodization – Qajar, Pahlavi, post-Revolution – sets the background for the main analytical chapters to follow. Information is also given on other translation research in Iran, and on sources. The journal *Motarjem* has clearly played an important role in the promotion of translation awareness in Iran, and it is disappointing to read that it ceased publication in 2012. There are occasional glimpses of fascinating avenues for future research: the role of prison, for instance, in the professionalization of literary translators (p. 49).

Chapter 3 deals with the Qajar period (1795–1925). The illustrative case study here is Esfahani's translation of Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1905). This novel was written by a British diplomat of Swiss-Dutch parentage, and first translated into French. Haddadian-Moghaddam indicates (p. 70) that it is not entirely clear whether Esfahani was working from the French or the English version: this is odd, since the translation has evidently been selected for study as a translation from English. There is of course the possibility that the translation is an "eclectic" one, where the translator has used both the original English and the French translation as source texts. Such a working method is not unusual. The various agents involved in this translation and its publication are given lively thumbnail sketches: the whole story of the Persian version is indeed fascinating. The suggested notions of "pro-risk agents of translation" and "travelling agency" seem to be promising. The section analysing the translation itself is unfortunately rather brief, with only a few examples and no quantitative analysis. This characteristic is also true of later sections of textual analysis: they remain rather superficial. The author has given priority to breadth of coverage, rather than depth – no doubt largely for reasons of space and time. But still, seven cases are a lot for a single monograph.

Chapter 4 covers the Pahlavi period (1925–1979). Censorship becomes a major contextual issue, both during this period and the following one. Translators' various coping strategies are explored in chapters 4 and 5, with interesting and occasionally surprising examples. Another important issue is copyright, which remains a problem. It is dismaying to read that Iran has still not signed the Universal Copyright Convention, nor the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works. This chapter's first case study is Shamsol Moluk Mosāheb's translation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1957). We are given a brief portrait of the translator, her activist and pedagogical aims, and on the publication history of this translation; some comments on the translation and translator's footnotes, and paratextual features such as the translator's introduction and the cover page; and a summary of one review of the translation. This last is interesting, but it is scarcely justified to claim that "it tells us how the Persian critics perceived the translation" (p. 100). It only indicates one critic's response, which may or may not be representative.

A second case study then looks at individual and institutional agency in three publishing houses: Amir Kabir, Bongāh-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketāb, and the Teheran branch of the American Franklin Book Programs. This last was thus very different from the other two,

having a clear anti-communist agenda. In the discussion of the functioning and influence of all three publishers, the role of key individuals, charismatic entrepreneurs, is striking. Another trend was the growing importance of literary translation during the period in question.

Chapter 5, the post-revolution period, brings us up to the present. Here, there are as many as four case studies: a survey pilot-study on Iranian translators, conducted via a questionnaire; agency in a later translation of *Pride and Prejudice* (by Rezaei, published in 2006), based partly on interviews with the translator and the publisher, Ney Publishing; Kowsari's translation (an indirect one, via English) of Mario Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World* (2000); and an interview study of three women translators. There is thus quite a mix of methods here, as in the book as a whole, and a good many different topics are touched on. The result is a kind of mosaic, with many details that might repay more detailed attention.

The variety of motivations to translate is noteworthy. The author comments that during the Iran–Iraq War, some translators found translation to be “an instrument of tranquillity” (p. 120), i.e. a way of escaping the surrounding horror, of remaining sane. Censorship, to some extent in a new form, is also a central issue, as is the lack of the reading habit in Iran (p. 124). Publishers have to think carefully how to respond to pressures from the Government and influential conservative circles. The analysis of how publishers and translators manoeuvre among such contextual constraints is one of the high points of the book.

The survey study is reported on only briefly, and the analysis of the data is rather undeveloped. No cross-categorizations are suggested between the responses to different questions, and it is not clear which results were particularly surprising or significant: respondents' views differed on many points. The *Pride and Prejudice* case is a retranslation, but the discussion often seems to blur the distinction between a retranslation and a new or revised edition. The presentation follows the pattern of the earlier studies, with more attention given to the agents involved and to the paratexts than to a textual analysis of the translation itself. We are not given information about the nature of the author's interviews with the translator and the publisher.

Kowsari's indirect translation from Spanish is analysed in a similar way, and here too there have been interviews with both translator and publisher (more information on these is given this time, with questions given in an appendix). The complex pressures of censorship, and how to cope with them, remain relevant. One is impressed by the seriousness of both interviewees, trying to contribute to the development of Iranian culture under difficult circumstances. They share a concern not only for the cultural atmosphere in the country, but also the social context of the more underprivileged sectors of the society.

The last case study is based on interviews with three women translators: Mozhdah Daqiqi, Khojasteh Keyhān and Shirin Ta'āvoni. The interviews are described as being “in-depth”, but here again information is missing about the exact nature of the interviews, whether they were recorded (and if so, how), how structured they were, and so on. The interviewees reported having different kinds of motivations for their translation work. One strategy mentioned for coping with censorship is to talk openly about it in public, and another is “translating for the drawer”, i.e. for the future, with the hope that a more tolerant ideological context will develop in time. In these interviews, as in those in some of the other case studies here, it is notable that translators themselves can often suggest titles to publishers: a clear sign of their agency.

It seems that literary translators in Iran can succeed in constructing a kind of “agency space” for themselves, within a constraining structure.

The final chapter sums up, considers some implications, limitations and follow-up possibilities. The author is careful not to conclude with “generalizations”, preferring to suggest possible “inferences”. Rhetorically, however, the difference between these is not always clear. The conclusion that “Iranian translators perform just as important a role in selecting novels for translation as the publishers” (p. 180) looks like a generalization, and so do other conclusions. It might have been clearer simply to formulate the conclusions with more reservation, more hesitantly: “Iranian translators seem to perform...”, or “This evidence suggests that...” A good point is made about the applicability of Bourdieu’s theory to the Iranian field in question: there seems to be evidence of a good deal of cooperation between agents, not just competition.

The implications of this study are evident. It provides valuable information that is not easily available otherwise, particularly about the publishing field in Iran. It gives visibility to the work of literary translators there, and especially to their higher motivations, i.e. beyond practical financial ones. It makes an interesting contribution to Translation Studies, in its application of the author’s model of agency. And it opens a window on aspects of the long-term cultural evolution of Persian culture. Of the follow-up suggestions, one concerns research on the relation between translation and World Literature, and another calls for more work on the reception of literary translation in Iran. Let’s hope we see such work one day.

Finally, an editorial criticism: the book would have greatly benefited from one more (native English) proof-reading. Most of the slips are obvious and easily corrected, but some may be more tricky. On p. 30, what is the “bury”? On p. 49, the “dominated” Western languages must surely be “dominating”. On p. 133, the sentence beginning “In order to examine the effects” seems to have something missing in the middle. In the table on p. 136, the date of the Jāme ‘i translation should presumably be 1997, not 1993 (or is the previous text wrong?); I was confused at several points about the details of the relation between the text on the previous page and this table. And in several places in the book the text mentions that a translator “published” his/her work; however, this must usually mean that it was submitted to a publisher, who was responsible for the actual publishing.

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Andrew Chesterman
University of Helsinki