

Translation of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Books in Iran: An Exploratory Research¹

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Abstract

Isaac Asimov is among the most well-known Science Fiction (SF) writers worldwide. He was a significant writer of America's SF golden age, who contributed profoundly to this genre, and whose ideas influenced many successive SF writers. The SF genre in Iran primarily exists through translations, with limited research on popular literature, especially SF. Therefore, this study aimed to build a bibliography of Asimov's SF books translated into Persian, to overview the past, present, and potential future of Asimov's SF books in the Iranian literary system. To this end, all of Asimov's SF works translated into Persian were identified using Iran's national library website, yielding 369 entries, of which 67 were SF titles—48 new translations and the rest retranslations. Around 38 different publishers published his works, and 27 translators translated these books. Based on the number of his SF books in each decade, the 1990s was the time when Asimov's works were most published in Iran. Then, after a decade of stagnation, the popularity of his books seems to be rising again. Then, after a decade of stagnation, the popularity of his books is seemingly rising again. Overall, this paper calls attention to research on the translation of popular literature and overlooked genres such as SF. The findings could open research avenues for further studies in translation history.

Keywords: American literature, Bibliography, Isaac Asimov, Science fiction translation, Translation history

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1. Introduction

Popular fiction can be simply defined as widely read books; however, a more sophisticated definition would be that popular fiction consists of several genres of narrative pleasure, such as suspense, horror, or futuristic speculation (Glover & McCracken, 2012). Therefore, one might argue that speculative fiction is a subset of popular fiction, encompassing genres with fantastic and unfamiliar elements. Wilkins (2012) believes that speculative fiction is usually divided into three subgenres: fantasy fiction, SF, and horror. To distinguish SF from fantasy genre, it is better to first define fantasy. Fantasy appeals to those interested in lengthy historical novels set in mythical realms, perhaps with a touch of magic, while SF explores a variety of themes, such as dystopias and time travels (D'Amassa, 2005). "Science fiction" refers to stories that create plausible fictional scenarios based on real or hypothetical scientific principles, new technologies, or societal changes (Abrams & Harpham, 2014). Therefore, science and (scientific) imagination are central to SF. As science, technology, and artificial intelligence (AI) have become hot topics, the need for this kind of literature is felt more than ever before.

As rightfully argued by Bianchi and Zanettin (2018), translation of popular fiction, with only a few articles scattered among different journals, is an under-researched area in Translation Studies (TS). This situation applies in Iran, with minimal research on SF literature (Ghassaa, 2017; Mirabedini, 2013). Therefore, the present study, derived from an unpublished dissertation by the researcher and part of an enumerative bibliography of SF genre in translation history field in Iran, aims to provide archival research of translations of a prominent SF author.

Given the limited literature on this genre in Iran, it seems reasonable to first compile a bibliography of Asimov's translated SF books to assess their reception over time. Only a few bibliographical studies in Iran go beyond merely listing books published on a specific topic within a given period or geographical area

(Shoughpour et al., 2022). One such instance is the research by Parham and Rassouli (2024b), which analyzes bibliographical data using both historiographical and scientometric approaches. They examine the networking patterns among authors, universities, publishers, and cities (Parham & Rassouli, 2024a). The other work is by Mousavi Razavi and Hedayati (2019), which investigates how translation has led to the emergence of a new dystopian genre known as Cli-Fi (a sub-genre of Sci-Fi) in Persian. However, the majority of Persian bibliographic studies fail to take into account the translators, translation titles, publishers, the books of a specific author, or the literary genres. These compilations typically record the number of copies, text types (philosophy, religion, literature, etc.), and the place of publication; they lack the crucial information for TS, such as translators' names and retranslations. Therefore, as the first step, this study aims to list all Asimov's SF books translated into Persian to reflect on their translations and publication trends across different cultural contexts. This need of making (re)translation bibliographies has been acknowledged by Albachten and Gürçağlar (2018), as they compiled a bibliography of retranslations in the Turkish and Ottoman societies. They contend that enumerative bibliographies lead to a variety of comprehensive critical analyses on specific works. Similar translation bibliographies were compiled by Iranian scholars such as Afshar and Kenarsari (1998), as they recorded the novels and stories from before the Constitutional Revolution to 1995, and by Farahzad and Sanjarani (2023), as they compiled a bibliography of books published by Franklin Publishing House (FPH).

There is not much academic research available on SF translations in Iran, except for the national studies on the French SF author, Jules Verne (Farsian, 2013; Nouraei, 2020; Vazirabadi, 2018). The reason for this is that Verne is the most known and translated SF writer in Iran, and his books were first translated into Persian as the French language was dominant in Iran. Moreover, since several

Iranian universities offer French literature and translation majors, this resulted in training scholars interested in research on Verne's works.

Given this context of research on SF in Iran, one of the greatest American SF writers who had an undeniable role both in disseminating SF ideas through his SF books and popularizing science through his non-fiction scientific books was selected as the topic of research. According to the UNESCO's Index, Asimov is the 24th most-translated author globally⁴. Steadman (2020) identifies him as one of the "Big Three" SF authors of all time alongside Heinlein and Clarke. Asimov mostly wrote *hard* SF based on rigorous scientific knowledge and won numerous accolades, including a Nebula Award for *The Bicentennial Man* (1977), and multiple lifetime achievement awards, which make him a great case study. This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the titles of Asimov's SF books that were translated into Persian, when, and by whom?
2. When were they translated?
3. Who were the translators?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Science Fiction in Iran

As Balay (2007) recorded the earliest books published in Iran, two books belong to SF genre, including *Safar-e Hachtâd Ruzéh Dowré Donyâ*⁵ translated by Zakâ ol-Molk in 1899–1900 and *Captain Atras's travelogue with the North Pole*⁶ translated by Etimad al-Saltaneh in 1903–1904. Thus, *Safar-e Hachtâd Ruzéh Dowr-e Donyâ* is considered the first SF translation in Iran. Due to the popularity of Verne, as a scientific writer, and the familiarity of the Iranian elites with the French language, the introduction of SF books began with Verne. Later, the English

4. <https://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatexp.aspx?crit1L=5&nTyp=min&topN=50>

5. سفر هشتادروزه دور دنیا

6. شرح مسافرت کاپیتان اطراس بقطب شمال

language replaced the French language in Iran, and English and American authors became more advanced in writing SF. Advances in printing industry and an increase in the number of educated people, filled the market with books that were primarily translated from English. For instance, after the establishment of FPH (1954–1976), the translation of American books was prioritized to disseminate American ideas, and the literary market was dominated by American books (Farahzad & Sanjarani, 2023; Laugesen & Rahimi-Moghaddam, 2022).

Academic research on SF literature in Iran is still in its early stages, with few scholars addressing this issue, such as Moghadam and Porugiv (2018). As they connected SF in general, and Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in particular, to the ideas of the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek and read it as a postmodernist work. They focused on the *Otherness* of androids and how the society treats the Others, and the blurry boundaries between humans and non-humans. Another research was conducted on the concept of motherhood in Sherri Tepper's SF books based on Irigaray's feministic read of Freud and Lacan (Parvizi & Ahmadzadeh, 2012). Some studies were carried out on Iranian authors who wrote SF. For example, Parhizkari (2014) examined utopian and dystopian themes in the works of Musa Nasri, San'atizadeh Kermani, and Hedayat, identifying common patterns.

2.2. Isaac Asimov's Biography and Science Fiction Books

A brief biography of Isaac Asimov (1920–1992) and his most significant SF works is presented here. Asimov authored or edited around 500 volumes (Gregersen, 2024) and served as a role model for many SF writers. He inspired many pioneers, such as Elon Musk, the founder of SpaceX (spacecraft manufacturing company) and OpenAI (AI research organization), who in various interviews referred to SF stories, especially Asimov's *Foundation* series (Locke, 2020). The *Foundation* series, which was voted the most popular series in the SF

history, is considered a guide for novels about galactic empires (D'Ammassa, 2005).

Asimov's birthplace was Petrovichi, Russia, as his last name suggests, but he gained American citizenship as an infant. His father's shop provided him unlimited access to pulp magazines, which led him to be an avid SF reader. After obtaining a Ph.D. in chemistry, he taught biochemistry for a few years before dedicating himself to writing full-time in 1958.

His output as an author is massive, only some works that are regarded as the most important, or influential are mentioned to familiarize the readers with his works. His first short story was sold to *Amazing Stories* magazine in 1939. In the 1950s, Asimov published more SF books, including *I, robot* (1950), *The Stars, Like Dust* (1951), and *The Currents of Space* (1952). Then, the *Foundation* trilogy was written: *Foundation* (1951) contained the first portion of the saga of Hari Seldon, a psychohistorian foreseeing the human empire's collapse. *Foundation and Empire* (1952) and *Second Foundation* (1953) continued the saga. Then, the young adult *Lucky Starr* series appeared in 1952, followed by five more novels, in each of which, adventures happened on different planets. During the 1970s, *The Gods Themselves* (1972), the winner of the Hugo and Nebula Awards, was written. Between 1990 and 1992, he collaborated with Silverberg on three novels, each based on Asimov's short stories. The novels were *Nightfall* (1990, based on the story of the same name), *Child of Time* (1991, based on *The Ugly Little Boy*), and *The Positronic Man*, (1992, based on *The Bicentennial Man*) (D'Ammassa, 2005).

3. Methodology

Carter and Barker (2004) define bibliography as a systematic description of books according to a certain criterion, such as subject, author, period, and products of a particular publisher, and divide bibliographies into enumerative, analytical,

and descriptive. Enumerative bibliographies attempt to record and list, rather than detailed description (Belanger, 1977 as cited in Albachten & Gürçağlar, 2013). “Enumerative bibliographies are often the result of archival research and surveys of specific works, which provide the basis for more analytical works on translation history” (Albachten & Gürçağlar, 2018, pp. 213–214). Similarly, this study contributes to the history of literary translation, SF genre in general, and Asimov’s SF books in particular, and attempts to identify the agents contributing to the transfer of this author’s ideas to the target language.

The corpus included all the SF books (anthologies, short stories, novelettes, and novels) that were (co)written by Asimov and were translated between 1983 and 2021, i.e., from the time when the first SF book by Asimov was translated into Persian to the end time for collecting information for this research. The information about the translated books was retrieved from Iran’s national library website (www.nlai.ir). The information on the original English versions was collected from various sources, including the Asimov catalog⁷, an Excel sheet from Saeed Simorgh (Personal telegram channel), and an annotated bibliography of Asimov’s books for further search⁸. The data collection process was conducted as follows: At first, the full name of the author, Isaac Asimov (in Persian آیزاک آسیموف) was searched on Iran’s national library website and the tab (only books) was selected and then all the books by his name were presented (n=369). Then, the researchers checked all the book titles one by one to distinguish between the SF ones and the unrelated ones (e.g., scientific non-fiction books and autobiographies by Asimov). Next, all the relevant information, including the translated titles, publishers, translated publication years, re-editions, and translators were obtained from national library databases,

7. http://www.asimovonline.com/oldsite/asimov_titles.html retrieved from Asimovonline.com

8. <http://stevenac.net/asimov/Bibliography.htm> and <https://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?5>

and were entered into an Excel sheet by the researchers. Additionally, the original English titles and publication dates were obtained from the annotated bibliography, as previously mentioned, and compared and added to the Persian bibliography. The collected data is presented in the appendix. Furthermore, the SF books that did not physically exist in the national library and the researchers could not find even an online e-book version of them were excluded.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, from 1983 to 2021 (38 years), 67 SF titles by Asimov were translated into Persian. The first was *Lucky Starr and the Big Sun of Mercury* (1956), translated as (شبح خورشید/the Sun's Ghost/1983) by Shahriyar Behtarin.

Therefore, the translation of Asimov's SF works started with the fourth novel of the juvenile *Lucky Starr* series. By the time of the first publication of Asimov's SF book, he was already known as a scientific writer in the Iranian literary market due to the publication of his scientific non-fiction books. *The Living River* (1960) was the first Asimov's book translated into Persian by Anvar Shakki, M. D., and was titled *Rud-e-Zendegi/ رود زندگی* (1964). Bongāh-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketāb published it as part of their basic science publication to educate the upcoming generations. As inferred, the translation of the first SF book started 19 years after the first translation of Asimov's scientific non-fiction book which is understandable since at that time, policy-makers wished to first educate people on scientific matters, and the translation of scientific imagination came afterward.

From 1983 to 2021, 48 new books were translated, and 19 titles were retranslated. The information about the number of books published per decade is illustrated in Figure 1.

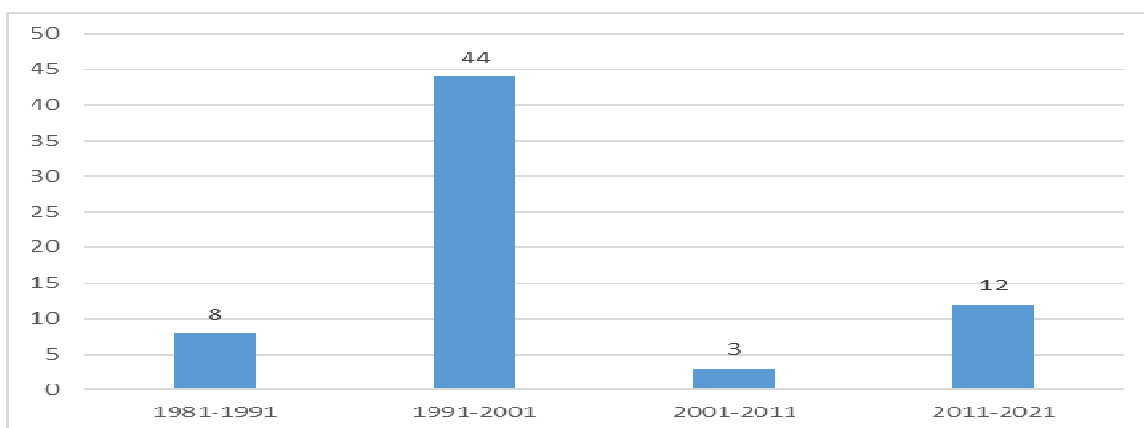


Figure 1. Number of Asimov's SF translated books per decade

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the translation of Asimov's SF books started in the 1980s, with eight books. Then, the 1990s, was the time when a large portion of Asimov's SF novels were translated into Persian ($n=44$). In the 2000s, a significant decrease was observed in the number of books, as only three books were published in this decade. However, ten years later, from (2011–2021) the number of books quadrupled.

During 1981–1991, only eight of Asimov's SF books were translated, largely due to the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) creating an unwelcoming market for new literature. As Farahzad (2011) argues, during this period, reprints and retranslations of previously approved works outnumbered new translations, as they required less effort and were aligned with societal norms. The focus was on familiar genres, such as long novels and romances. The books that were in line with the ethical, political, and social norms of the time were the most published. According to the reasons mentioned, since the localization strategy was dominant and Asimov's SF novels contained new ideas, only eight books were published in the 1980s. In contrast, Verne as a representative of the SF genre was among the most translated authors of that time (Farahzad, 2011). However, from 1991 to 2001, there was a boom in the translation of not only Asimov ($n=44$ books) but also SF in general. As Ghassaa (2017) contends, the SF genre was noticed in this decade with the help of the translated works and movies/series broadcasted from TV, and the

translators, readers, and publishers consciously translated, read, and published this type of literature.

Despite an increase in the number of published books (*Ketab baad az enghelab-e eslami che sarneveshti peyda kard?*, 2018) during 2001–2011, the number of translated SF works and books written by Asimov considerably decreased as most active publishers in the previous decade abandoned this genre and shifted to more profitable genres (Ghassaa, 2017). In addition, the rise of the Internet in Iran facilitated the translation and sharing of short stories among fans. In the subsequent decade (2011–2021), it seems that social media platforms (e.g., Instagram accounts of SF translators and Telegram groups/channels dedicated to Asimov) and adaptation of his books to movies/series (e.g., Apple TV+ *Foundation* series) have contributed to Asimov's return to the limelight in recent years. Since some of his books are SF classics and prize winners and part of the world literature, it seems that efforts are underway to introduce these books to new generations.

In terms of popularity, for instance, Translation of *I, Robot* has been notably popular as it was re-published seven times (1966/1985/1991/1993/2001/2004/2019) in Hungary (Sohár, 2023). However, in Iran, it was translated three times (1995/1997/2011). Its film adaptation seems to be more popular in Iran, as it was aired repeatedly on IRIB channels. In terms of retranslation, *The Currents of Space* (1952) stands out, with four different translators and publishers. Furthermore, there is a gap in research on the motivations for SF retranslations. Issues, such as procedures of revision, the identity of the (re)translator, cultural and linguistic changes in the target contexts, and the target audience's expectations, as discussed by Haug (2018) or the literary quality and fame of the source text, economic potential, and political reasons, as suggested by Van Poucke (2018).

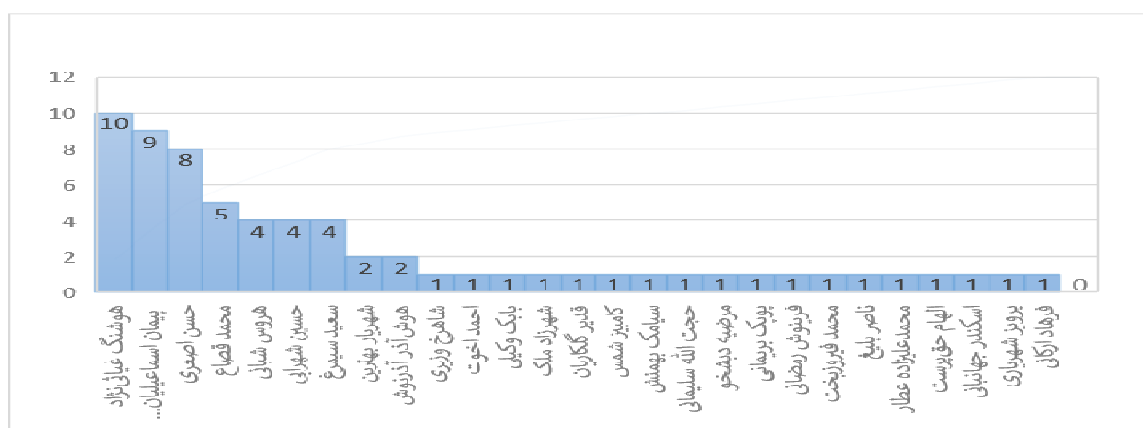


Figure 2. Translators and the number of books they have translated

As shown in Figure 2, various translators translated Asimov's SF books, among whom, Ghiasi Nejad with 10 books was the most prolific translator, and Esmailian and Asghari were second and third with nine and eight books, respectively. Out of 27 translators, five were female. Pym (2014) believes that in translation history research, the translator is the primary object of study. He maintains that in this way, enough attention is paid to the translators as individuals and translation historians can expand their historical knowledge and find answers to issues, such as the reasons for the production of translations in a specific time and place. Therefore, further research is required on translators of this genre to put faces to names and obtain demographic information about the translators.

Similarly, Sohár (2023) examined the first translations of Asimov during the Communist Kádár era (1956–1989) in Hungary. She analyzed the first two Hungarian translations of Asimov and identified instances of censorship that led to significant changes in the message of the original works, resulting in the presentation of a false image of Asimov which still persists in Hungarian public opinion. It is suggested that Asimov prioritized ideas and plot over characterization and description, categorizing him as a storyteller rather than a stylist. Although Asimov did not pay special attention to style and was more focused on concepts, he still maintained a unique voice. Sohár (2023) believes that this depiction of Asimov's image is partly due to the mentioned alterations and partially because

Asimov had no distinct Hungarian voice, as his works were translated by at least 24 different translators during this period, with only five translating his texts more than once, which is similar to our findings.

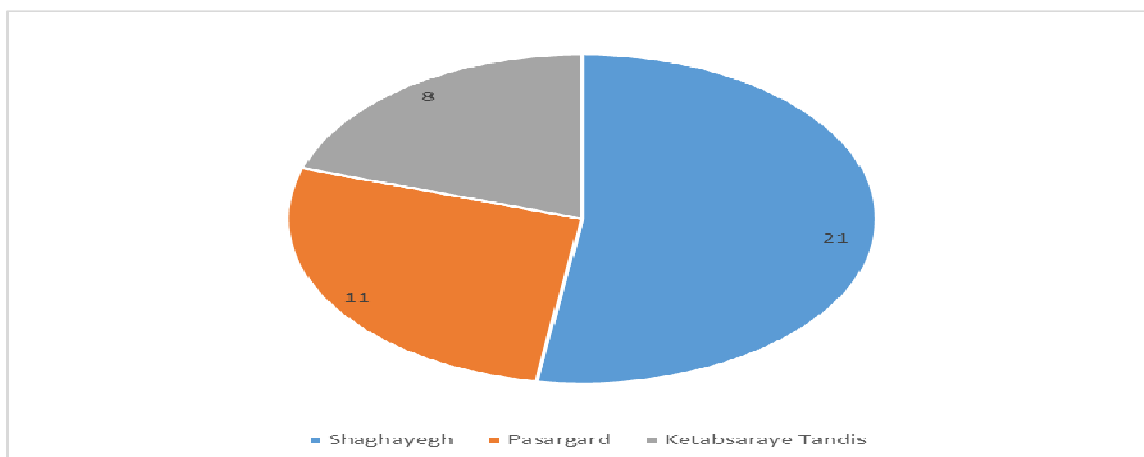


Figure 3. Publishing houses

Thirty-eight publishers published Asimov's SF books through the years, Shaghayegh with 21 titles was the most active, and Pasargad and Ketabsara-ye Tandis with 11 and eight were the next active publishers, respectively (Figure 3). Recently, several publishers are focusing more specifically on genres. For example, in our case, Ketabsara-ye Tandis mostly publishes genre-specific books belonging to fantasy, SF, and crime.

The literature on agents, networks, and publishing houses in Iran is limited. This may be partly due to the fact that, as Haddadian Moghaddam (2012) claims, accessing publishing houses in Tehran is difficult. Tracing agents is often impossible when data is kept secret or informants withhold information. Publishers tend to maintain confidentiality regarding their practices. Therefore, investigating the role of agents involved in the translation process, the constraints, and the ways they establish their networks (e.g., publisher-led or translator-led) is challenging.

Some publishing houses have been dissolved for various reasons, making it difficult to trace their records online or in the real world. In our case, the researchers

were not able to find relevant information about Pasargard except the fact that, as argued by Ghassaa (2017), from 1986–1996, Shaghayegh, Pasargard, and Noghteh published some SF series. However, these publishers from 1996 onwards, stopped publishing SF books and started to publish other genres which were deemed more popular and profitable (Ghassaa, 2017). Shaghayegh Publishing House was founded in 1971 and started its official publication in 1978. It started with the publication of Classical literature, Iranian and foreign novels, general medical books, SF books, and children’s literature. Now, four publishers work under the supervision of the Shaghayegh publishing house and mostly publish Iranian novels written by lesser-known female writers⁹.

In a book catalogue on the Ketabsara-ye Tendis’s website, a list of all their published books in 2023 was provided. Seventy-one books were categorized under the SF genre, out of which 12 books were from Asimov¹⁰. In addition, although the number of published titles increases every year, the average number of copies is going through a downward trend, and to put it simply, fewer copies of each book are printed and sold (Afzali & Abujaafari, 2018).

A challenge in discussing SF in Iran is the failure of scholars to distinguish SF from fantasy. For instance, Dehghani (2020) surveyed 484 seventh and eighth graders in Shiraz, Iran, and found that they preferred stories with realistic themes and then fantasy were favored among both boys and girls. Although valuable information was revealed in this study and other similar studies, since the researcher made no differentiation between fantasy and SF, it remains unclear whether readers prefer SF or fantasy and further interpretations could not be made about the SF readers.

9. <https://shaghayeghbooks.ir/about>

10. <https://tandispub.com/about-us/>

5. Conclusion and Implications

Based on the obtained findings, 67 SF books by Asimov were published in Persian between 1983 and 2021. More precisely, 48 titles were new, while the remaining were retractions. Thirty-eight publishers and 27 translators were involved. According to the number of his SF books published in each decade, the 1990s was the period when Asimov was most published in Iran. After a decade of stagnation, the popularity of his books seems to be rising again. Furthermore, the findings of this study could pave the way for further research on translation history. It is hoped that this compiled bibliography, which is part of a larger ongoing bibliography (written and translated SF books in Iran), will contribute to digital humanities (digital archives) by providing a searchable database. Compiling such translation bibliographies will open avenues for further research on topics such as retractions, pseudo-translations, publishing trends, publishers, and translators, and then similar to a missing piece, will serve to complete the Iranian translation history's puzzle.

Appendix

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QTJo3tCkrTJS6wzzX5_C3fwNfD1iHeX8/edit?usp=sharing&oid=101420050895284183670&rtpof=true&sd=true

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