

BOOK REVIEW

Translation and History: A Textbook

Written by Theo Hermans, London and New York, Routledge, 2022. (ISBN 9781138036970).

Received: 18 June 2025; Revised: 25 July 2025; Published: 02 September 2025

Lei Du

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, China

Email: duleihangzhou@163.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2865-1587>

Zhengwu Cai

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, China

Email: caizhengwuzju@163.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6202-6129>

The construction of a translation history is considered the “primary task” of a modern theory of translation (Berman 1984, 12). As a relatively young branch of Translation Studies, the significance of translation history has gained widespread recognition and sparked considerable interest, becoming increasingly popular in recent years. In spite of the fact that we are reading more and more books on and about the translation history, there existed almost no such book that catered to the learning needs of the students. In that sense, *Translation and History: A Textbook* by Theo Hermans is a timely rarity.

As a textbook, *Translation and History* provides beginners with the essentials they need for independent research: theories, concepts, methods, samples, suggestions, and even lessons usually gained through the author’s bitter experiences over his long academic career. Consisting of six chapters, the book has a clear layout: Chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to basic historical concepts and research methodologies. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with different types of translational historiography underpinned by historical theories and translation cases, and Chapter 6 provides readers with the author’s original insight into translation as history.

In Chapter 1, Hermans expounds the concept of narrativism in historiography, particularly the tension between the historiographical subjectivity and truth, focusing on the contributions of a number of scholars. By exploring how stories and histories are intertwined through the lens of narrative theory, Hermans emphasizes that historical narratives, much like stories, are constructed through dynamic interplays between facts and interpretive frameworks. This discussion sets the stage for the book’s focus on the historical study of translation, where Hermans offers readers a methodological toolkit. He introduces key perspectives such as the structuring of historical periods and geographic boundaries, examines the forces driving re-translation, and addresses historical discourses surrounding translation as an evolving cultural practice. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 deal with three topics: historiography, translational conceptual history, and interfaces between translation and memory. By referring to and commenting



on extant studies in an extensive manner, the book serves to enlighten its readers both on the role the translation plays in shaping history and the way historical methods facilitate translation research. In Chapter 6, Hermans seeks to elucidate the role of translation in history. To present translation as an intervention that shapes historical trajectories, Hermans endeavors to uncover the temporal layers within translation. He argues that translation is not merely a reflection embedded with temporal layers and inter-textual traces that document its relevance to historical and contemporary discourses; it is also an active agent that engages with existing conditions and intervenes in the course of history.

The book offers practical value for novice researchers, providing essential tools and guidance to anchor their studies in theoretical frameworks. Each chapter begins with an exploration of relevant theories, made accessible to learners through engaging storytelling that simplifies complex ideas. In addition, the book introduces a structured methodology for conducting translation history research, guiding readers through the key stages of a research project—from defining clear objectives and formulating research questions to collecting data and constructing a coherent narrative. Hermans emphasizes that “a research project begins with curiosity, due diligence, and an initial hunch that leads to a research question” (p. 31), underscoring the importance of an inquisitive and systematic approach. “In the search for solid bases for empirical research, the translation history scholar cannot overlook the existing bibliographies, databases, catalogues, or lists.” (Castro 2022, 39) To further support emerging researchers, the book offers a robust toolkit of practical resources. These include online databases such as WorldCat, Perso-Indica, UNESCO’s Index Translationum, the Renaissance Cultural Crossroads Catalogue, and the Digital Library and Bibliography for Literature in Translation. It also introduces software tools to enhance translation history analysis, such as Google’s Ngram Viewer for tracking temporal usage of terms, Keywords in Context for examining keyword proximities, and Mosaic for corpus processing and visualization. By integrating theoretical principles with these practical resources, the book bridges the gap between theory and practice, empowering researchers to undertake their projects with both depth and scientific precision.

The critical insights presented in the book are both perceptive and thought-provoking. Hermans demonstrates an exemplary level of self-awareness regarding the “risks” inherent in referencing the theories and studies of others. This approach is particularly evident in Chapter 1, where he re-evaluates historical narrativism within the context of translation history (pp. 17-22). A history of translation, “like any history, endows translation practices with significance through a specific narrative form or mixture of forms” (Venuti 2005, 812). Hermans approaches the narrative lens of translation history with remarkable breadth and depth. To address absolute narrativists who contend that history is no more than a constructed, relative, and ultimately irrecoverable narrative, Hermans invokes the traditional historian’s perspective, which anchors historical inquiry in objective truth and verifiable facts. He defends the reliability and legitimacy of translation history by drawing on Martha Cheung’s approach of *tuishou* or “pushing-hands”—a concept that fosters a dialogic engagement and a fusion of binary concepts. It is in this way that Hermans articulates his outlook on translation history that honors the integrity of historical truth while acknowledging the interpretive role of contemporary scholarship.

Hermans frequently engages in critique and comparative analysis following his examination of various case studies. For example, in the section titled “On Individualism” in Chapter 4 (92-94), he reviews Zhu and Kim’s corpus-based study of *geren zhuyi*, a pivotal Chinese term for individualism. While he acknowledges the study’s strength in covering an extensive historical timeline, he critiques



its limited contextual grounding, which hinders a deeper exploration of the term's interactions with other concepts and its possible influence on China's path to modernity. In contrast, Hermans highlights Lydia Liu's related study, which adopts a broader and more dynamic perspective on translation, enriching the analysis with carefully integrated historical contexts. Through such inquiries, Hermans not only sharpens readers' academic judgment but also establishes a rigorous benchmark for research in translation history, encouraging readers to have a contextual and critical engagement with their research.

Alongside translation criticism and translation theory, translation history forms one of the "three core pillars" supporting translation as a discipline (Xie 2013, 5). For students and scholars venturing into this field, the need for structured guidance has long been conspicuous. Hermans's book fills this gap, offering a serviceable resource for both emerging researchers seeking foundational guidance and established scholars pursuing deeper insights into the study of translation history.

Declarations and Acknowledgment:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest. This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China [24BYY109].

References

- Berman, A. (1984). *L'épreuve de l'étranger*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Castro, Cristina G. (2022). "The Use of Corpora and Other Electronic Tools in Historical Research on Translation Castro." In Christopher Rundle (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History* (pp. 38-53). Abingdon, UK: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1075/hl.00134.che>
- Venuti, L. (2005). Translation, History, Narrative. *Meta* 50(3), 800-816. <https://doi.org/10.7202/011597ar>
- Xie, Z. (2013). 给翻译史课应有的地位——对《高等学校翻译专业本科教学要求（试行）》的一点建议 [Giving Translation History Its Due Place: A Suggestion for the 'Undergraduate Teaching Requirements for Translation Majors in Higher Education Institutions(Trail)]. 东方翻译[East Journal of Translation], 25(5), 4-8.

About the Authors:

Lei Du is a professor at the department of Language and Translation, School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, China. His area of research includes the translation history of Chinese classical dramas.

Zhengwu Cai is a graduate student at the School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, China. His area of research includes the translation history of Chinese poems.

