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“MANAS” DOSTONI TARJIMALARI HAQIDA MULOHAZALAR

COMMENTS ON THE TRANSLATIONS OF MANAS

Annotatsiya: Maqolada “Manas” eposining turli tillarga tarjima qilinishi 3 davrga bo‘lib o‘rganilgan. Birinchi davr – 1938-1960-yillarda amalga oshirilgan tarjimalar bo‘lib, ular Semyon Lipkin, Lev Penkovskiy, Mark Tarlovskiy, Sergey Klychkov, Feliks Oshakevich va Emil Bekkerlar tomonidan qilingan. Biroq bu tarjima jarayonida bevosita qirg‘iz tili vakillari qatnashmagan, qolaversa, davr taqozosi bilan bir qator cheklovlarga duch kelinar edi. Ikkinchi davr – 1991-yillarda xorijiy tillarga bo‘lgan ko‘plab tarjimalar Manasning ikkita asosiy nashriga tayanadi: birinchisi, 1984-yildan boshlab chiqarilgan ikki tilli qirg‘iz-rus Orozbekov nashri; ikkinchisi esa, 2011-yilda nashr etilgan Mar Baijiyev tomonidan tahrir qilingan versiyadir. Uchinchi davrda esa Manasni tarjima qilish, ko‘plab holatlarda, ommaviy tashabbus bilan amalga oshirilgan. Ayniqsa, Devid Somfai Karaning eposni venger tiliga qilgan tarjimasi 2018-yilda yuksak mukofotga sazovor bo‘lgan.

Kalit so‘zlar: tarjima, qirg‘iz eposi, “Manas”, versiya.

Introduction

Translation has multiple applications, the foremost of which is enabling a work that exists in a source language to be read and known in a target language. This immediately raises the age-old questions of translation: what should be translated? how should it be translated? what choices must be made? Should one preserve the text, the meaning, the form, or the style?

In my research on the available translations of *Manas* into foreign languages, I sought to assess a claim I have often heard or read in Kyrgyzstan: “*Manas* has been translated into dozens of languages.” Beyond this quantitative assertion lies a more fundamental question: what exactly has been translated? A few lines, a fragment, an episode, or the epic in its entirety?

Translation is the first step toward understanding the other; it places the source language and the target language on an equal footing through the act of translation.

I will briefly address the question of *Manas* translations in three parts: the Soviet period, the contemporary period, and conclude with a few remarks on the context surrounding these translations.

1. Translations during the Soviet Period

Between 1935 and 1938, Semën Lipkin, Lev Penkovski, Mark Tarlovski, Sergei Klychkov, Feliks Oshakevich, and Emil Bekker served as the official translators in the Soviet Republican press. Of these, only two – Lipkin and Penkovski – would go on to have long careers. It appears that their translations, particularly those by Lipkin, along with the adaptations (novelizations) he produced, reached a broader audience. Their Russian versions often served as the basis for translations into other languages.

It is worth noting that none of these translators were themselves Kyrgyz, and it appears that none specified whether they collaborated with Kyrgyz-speaking co-translators.

All of these Russian translations were based on the version of the epic recorded by Orozbekov. A few translations of the Karalaev version appeared sporadically, the first of which was published in 1936, but it seems that Karalaev never achieved the same prominence as his predecessor.

After 1950, Russian translations became considerably less frequent and no longer appeared at the rapid pace seen in the preceding years. Finally, in 1984, a bilingual Kyrgyz-Russian edition was published—the first of its kind. This edition brought together a new team of editors and translators, most of whom were Kyrgyz. It was based on the Orozbekov version, and the Russian translation preserved the versification of the original. This bilingual edition later served as the foundation for Walter May's English translation in 1995.

It is also important to note that the Orozbekov version is simultaneously the one that has raised the most concerns, due to its inclusion of religious and pan-Turkic elements. This version was publicly criticized during the infamous Frunze conference in 1952, in an open letter by Aaly Tokombaev in 1987, and again in 2011 by Mar Baijiev.

While *Manas* was indeed translated numerous times between 1935 and 1990, these translations faced several limitations. The first of these is quantitative: the number of target languages. Within this time frame, the epic was translated into at least ten languages, seven of which belonged to the Soviet sphere of influence. By definition, this limited their reach—the translations remained confined to cultural exchange within the mosaic of Soviet nationalities (for example, into Lithuanian, Hungarian, or German, via Russian).

It was not until the 1960s that *Manas* began to circulate in the vernacular languages of Central Asia, among Kyrgyzstan's immediate neighbors.

Beginning in the 1960s as well, the epic began to reach Europe. The European translations from this period fall into two categories, which, despite their differences, share a common trait: elitism. The first group targeted politically left-leaning readers with an interest in Soviet culture (as seen in English translations published in *Soviet Land* or *Soviet Literature*). The second group consisted of the academic world, where translations were characterized by a rigorous, critical approach to the text (e.g., the translations by Arthur Thomas Hatto). In both cases, however, the readership remained limited.

2. Contemporary Translations (Post-1991)

Although *Manas* stands as the central cultural emblem of Kyrgyzstan, it remains largely inaccessible to most foreign audiences due to the limited number of translations available in English and other Western languages. These translations are not entirely absent, but rather reflect a sporadic and uneven activity.

Translations produced after 1991 are generally the work of individuals—whether scholars, poets, or amateurs—and/or are sponsored by the Kyrgyz state. Paradoxically, the latter has not proven to be the most visible or productive agent during the period in question. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that the Kyrgyz state did commit, in its 2012–2017 national program, to (and I quote):

“Make translations of the Manas epic from Kyrgyz into other languages in order to ensure a wide access to [the Kyrgyz] intangible cultural heritage.”

The contemporary period is marked by two parallel trends: the translation of classical versions of *Manas*—such as those of Orozbekov and Karalaev—and the translation of performances by contemporary *manasčy*. The distinction here is primarily formal: the former is often translated in extenso or in large sections, while the latter tend to appear only in limited translations—brief excerpts, isolated fragments, or single episodes. One of the defining characteristics of the post-independence period is the emergence of translations based on live performances by actual *manasči*,

thus reinforcing the Kyrgyz narrative of *Manas* as a living oral tradition and contributing to its reach among international audiences.

Contemporary translation efforts also continue the Soviet-era practice of rendering the epic into various Central Asian languages. However, it is important to approach quantitative claims with caution: many of these translations are in fact reissues of Soviet-era versions. This ongoing trend follows a logic of reciprocal exchange among formerly socialist cultures; today, it aligns more broadly with a framework of regional cooperation, aiming to strengthen cultural ties between independent neighboring states.

It is also noteworthy that most translations into foreign languages rely on two key editions of *Manas*: the first is the bilingual Kyrgyz-Russian Orozbekov edition, published beginning in 1984; the second is the version edited by Mar Baijiev, published in 2011. In the first case, we find the basis for the Italian (1997), Japanese (2001), and likely the Estonian (2012) translations, all produced by Russian-language specialists. In the second case, we can trace the Ukrainian and Uzbek translations (both from 2017), as well as the English versions published in 2016 and 2018.

3. Translation and Context

Ajybay is one of *Manas*'s close companions (*čoro*) and is described in the versions by *manasčy* Orozbekov and Karalaev as an eminent orator and polyglot – reportedly fluent in over seventy languages – as well as a skilled diplomat and negotiator.

I believe Ajybay embodies the multiple dimensions of what translation fundamentally is: the act of transferring a text from a source language to a target language, and adapting that text from one specific cultural context to another. It is an intellectual task that requires an intimate knowledge of multiple languages and cultures, and it demands talent, patience, determination and diplomacy. Not to mention financial resources.

Contemporary translations reflect several dynamics: first, the disappearance of new Russian-language translations of the epic (with the notable exception of the version by Jusup Mamay, translated by the late Vyacheslav Shapovalov); second, the reissuance of editions published during the Soviet era (for instance, in Tajik); and third, the increasing presence of sponsors who provide financial support for the publication and dissemination of these translations.

As for this last point, it is often difficult to determine whether certain translations stem from a state-led initiative – implying financial backing or at least symbolic endorsement from the Kyrgyz government. In most cases I have studied, the translations appear to result from a collaborative effort: a Western academic works alongside a Kyrgyz-speaking partner to produce the translation. This is the case, for instance, with the Italian and Estonian versions. In this light, one could argue that contemporary translations often reflect the activity and presence of the Kyrgyz diaspora abroad.

One cannot help but note the vibrancy of *Manas* translation efforts since 1991. Yet this vitality is driven by individuals – academics, philologists, poets, and other motivated actors – who often work in isolation from one another and without institutional coordination or state support. Translating *Manas* is, in most instances, a grassroots endeavor. Only a few translators have been officially recognized by the Kyrgyz state – for example, Dávid Somfai Kara, who was awarded for his Hungarian translation (in 2018).

I will not elaborate here on the *Manas* translations produced in China, which include versions into both Chinese and English, and about which I lack sufficient information, nor on the Turkish translations. I am confident these cases would offer rich comparative insights alongside the observations I have shared here.

Conclusion

I believe it is essential to carry out a methodical inventory of all existing translations of *Manas*, in order to better understand the scale of the phenomenon and gain greater control over it. What exactly do we wish to translate and why? Is the goal to make the text available to scholars, or to