Afshar \ Afšār \, Iraj (1304–89 š./1925–2011), eminent Iranologist and distinguished bibliographer. One of the most prolific contemporary scholars in Iran, Afshar was an exceptionally influential cultural figure participating in a wide range of activities, including editorship of several cultural journals, collaboration with many print publications, librarianship, cataloguing, indexing, and codicology. As a specialist of Iranian studies and the Qajar period (1786–1925), Afshar taught at universities in Iran and occasionally at universities abroad.

The diversity of his cultural contributions and research endeavours at different levels include working as a publishing manager, cooperating with numerous research centers and institutions of Iranian studies, working in libraries and centers for textology studies, and studying old manuscripts. Remaining physically and mentally well balanced, Afshar was known for his perseverance and tireless commitment to his professional career, and for leading a simple life and refraining from nonproductivity. His lifetime scholarly achievements comprise numerous contributions including books, articles, manuscript-editing duties, manuscript studies and corrections, handwritten inscription studies, indexing and cataloguing, numerous bibliography projects, lectures, talks, essays, and other writings.
Iraj Afshar was born in Tehran, into a cultured family from Yazd, Iran. His father, Mahmoud Afshar Yazdi, known for his profound love for Iran, was a prominent cultural figure of his time. Iraj attended the Zoroastrian Shāpour Secondary School in Tehran and Firouz-Bahram High School in Tajrish and graduated in 1328 š./ 1949 from the University of Tehran, School of Law, majoring in judicial studies. He was nineteen years old when he started assisting his father managing various affairs of the journal Āyandeh (Future), gaining his first practical experiences in managing and publishing cultural journals. During his student years he collaborated with the journal Jahān-e Now (New World) which was one of the leading progressive magazines of the time with leftist tendencies. He began his teaching career in 1329 š./ 1950, in a high school in Tehran. A year later, Afshar transferred to the University of Tehran and started to work as a librarian in the Law Library, Iran’s largest academic library in those years. Afshar, a self-thought librarian, learned the methods of library science experientially and by practice. Aside from his duties at the Law Library, he became editor-in-chief of the journal Mehr for some time (1331–32 š./ 1952–53). Afshar founded the journal Farhang-e Irānzamin (The culture of Persia) in 1331 š./1952, with association and consultation of his close friends and colleagues, all of whom became notable cultural figures in their areas of expertise including Mohammad-Taqi Dānesh-Pajouh, Mostafā Moqarrabi, Manouchehr Sotoudeh, and Abbas Zaryāb Khoyee. Farhang-e Irānzamin became one of the prestigious journals in the field of Iranian studies, the publication of which continues to the present time.

Iraj Afshar, when collaborating with the National Library of Iran (NLI) in 1333 š./1954, published the first volume of Ketābhāy-e Iran (books of Iran). This volume marked the dawn of an annual compiling and publishing of a comprehensive list of publications produced within Iran, a series that came to be known as Ketāb Shenāsi Melli-e Iran (Iranian national bibliography). Not a single governmental organization had undertaken the publication of any bibliographic classifications up to that date. As such, Afshar’s Ketāb Shenāsi Melli-e Iran, became the official listing of published books in the country. The first volume of Ketābhāy-e Iran classified and listed bibliographic data
of books that were published in Persian and were set in print in Iran in the year 1333 š./1954. Afshar arranged and published the rest of the collection using almost the same method as the previous years for twelve consecutive years, that is until 1345 š./1966. Parallel to all these activities, Afshar was the editor-in-chief of the journal Sokhan for two years (1333–35 š./1954–56), and the managing director of Ketābhāy-e Māh (Books of the Month) for six years (1334–40 š./1955–61).

In 1335 š./1956, another chapter in the academic career of Iraj Afshar began. Ehsan Yārshāter, the managing director of Bongāh-e Tārjomeh o Nasher-e Ketāb (The Institute for Translation and Publishing of Books), was obliged to be abroad recurrently throughout the year due to academic engagements. Yārshāter appointed Afshar as the acting managing director of the newly built publishing company. In Yārshāter’s absence, Afshar remained in charge of the company for nearly seven years (1335–42 š./1956–63). In 1335 š./1956 Afshar traveled to France and attended an educational training program sponsored by UNESCO on new methods, perspectives, and practices of library science as well as new theories of bibliographic classification and principles of cataloguing. Completing the UNESCO program, Afshar benefited from methodological accomplishments in bibliographic classification and the new knowledge on library science that profoundly transformed his vision and bloomed several offshoots of his visionary projects. For the next seven years, until 1342 š./1963, Afshar inaugurated various related initiatives including teaching modern library science and librarianship at Dāneshsarāy-e Ālee (The Institute for Higher Education); managing editorship of the journal Rāhnamāy-e Ketāb (Book Guide); cofounding Bāshgāh-e Ketāb (Book Club) along with Yārshāter that later became known as Anjoman-e Ketāb (Book Society); offering new services, assistance, and prospects to reading fans in Iran; laying the foundations of Nashriyeh Noskhehāy-e Khati (The journal of handwritten manuscripts) along with Mohammad-Taqi Daneshpazhouh; managing directorship of the National Library of Iran (NLI) for a certain period; commencing new initiatives in indexing, cataloguing, and classifying manuscripts, prints, and inscriptions at the NLI; and directing the Center of Bibliographic Research and Indexing at the University of Tehran.
Afshar had entertained the idea of compiling a bibliographical series dedicated exclusively to the listing of Persian articles several years earlier. The product of his efforts, the first volume of Fehrest-e Māqālāt-e Fārsi (a bibliography of articles in Persian) consisting of the bibliographic data of 6,000 articles in Persian published in Iranian studies and cultural journals both in Iran and abroad, went to print in 1338 š./1959. This survey of research essays and article listings in Persian was Afshar’s own innovation, the only one of its kind in Iran; this was an initiative of cataloguing academic journal articles in Iranian studies. The Iranian academic community was not receptive to this work and did not recognize this project at first; however, as times passed Fehrest-e Māqālāt-e Fārsi became more established in Iranian studies. This source of analytical cataloguing has been publishing to the present time, albeit slowly, and volume seven of this series was recently published (1389 š./2010).

In 1343 š./1964, Afshar took over the management of the University of Tehran Press and served in this position for about seven years. As the director of this institution, Afshar enriched the tradition that Parviz Natel Khanlari, the founder of the press, had originally established. Afshar made an effort to exert the policies of the university to safeguard this institution’s autonomy against the interventions of some of the more politically influential academics who were pursuing their own personal interests against the conventions and norms of proper conduct. A year later, during the administration of university president Jahanshah Saleh, Afshar was appointed as the director of the Central Library of the University of Tehran.

It was only a few months after the Islamic Revolution that Afshar retired from the most challenging responsibility of his career, the director in charge of creating, organizing, and completing the first and still largest central university library in Iran, an endeavour that he committed to for fourteen years. Afshar’s achievements in the making of the University of Tehran’s Central Library became a model for other universities in Iran. In 1345 š./1966, two years after he became the managing director of the Central Library, he founded a publication affiliate with this institution, the journal Ketābdāri, that was devoted to library and information sciences. Around the same
time, Afshar inaugurated the Master of Library Science Programme at the University of Tehran, which contributed to the promotion of training students in disciplinary librarianship and library sciences at institutions of higher education in Iran. Moreover, employment of foreign experts specializing in the most up-to-date achievements in library and information sciences at various consultative, executive, and administrative positions at the Central Library progressively flourished the corresponding university program. While at University of Tehran, Afshar faced some intense disagreement in methodological and logistical choices from a number of other experts who were also pursuing modernization of librarianship in Iran. However, since this group of Afshar’s critics were unfamiliar with the cultural particularities of their society and were ignorant of cultural differences and native distinctiveness, Afshar’s methodologies, his continuous dedication to the expansion of systematic cataloguing and bibliographic projects, gradually triumphed and had a significant impact on research projects, cultural works, and especially the field of Iranian studies.

In 1348 š./1969 the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tehran invited Afshar to join the Department of Literature’s History Division to teach courses on subjects of historical documents and local histories of Iran. For ten years, Afshar continued to teach with the Department of Literature, History Division, first as an associate professor and later as a full professor until his retirement from the University of Tehran. During this time, Afshar was also teaching courses on manuscript studies within the curriculum of library studies at the University of Tehran. Those librarian specialists, bibliographers, and cataloguers who participated in the professional training program on librarianship and took Afshar’s course on handwritten manuscript studies and cataloguing manuscripts became familiar with a very significant neglected area of civilizational inheritance that the derivative, imported knowledge on library studies would not pay due attention to for years to come.

From 1348 š./1969 and for the next ten years, Afshar engaged in several other productive cultural and academic endeavours, such as organizing nine successive Iranian studies conferences in the academic venues and universities of various Iranian cities, in
which a number of non-Iranian Iranologists participated along with their Iranian colleagues. He also became the director of the journal Iranshenāsi (Journal of Iranian Studies), a publication affiliated with the Department of Literature and Human Sciences at the University of Tehran. Along with all the official administrative and academic positions he held, Afshar continued his own individual research project and contributed immensely to the field of manuscript studies, cataloguing and indexing of handwritten manuscripts, bibliographies, and correcting and publishing historical texts and documents. In addition to this, Afshar’s personal fascination with late periods of Qajar history, particularly after the Iranian Constitutional Revolution era (1905–11), resulted in several published research works.3

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which coincided with Iraj Afshar’s retirement, a new period in his life began: his research projects, cultural efforts, and publishing activities that continued until a few months before his severe illness that caused his death on 18 Esfand 1389 š./March 8, 2011. In the postrevolution period, the collection of projects that Afshar carried out is possibly even more diverse, prolific, and productive compared to the rest of his career. Retirement released Afshar from his administrative and academic commitments, making more of his leisure time available. Afshar dedicated this newfound time to even more research leading to several diverse works published after his retirement. Afshar resumed the publication of Āyandeh, which his late father had founded and published years ago. Āyandeh, after the revolution, followed the genres and style of Rāhnamāy-e Ketāb and became a replacement for this periodical which was discontinued after 1372 š./1993 due to the difficulties of publishing cultural journals that were not granted government subsidies. Afshar became in charge of managing the endowments of the Doctor Mahmoud Afshar Foundation, which was established in memory of his father. Afshar continued to collect, select, and publish books and research articles in a series of publications associated with this foundation within the framework of Iranian studies.

Afshar closely supervised the publication of his numerous works in a diverse range of studies, most of which were published before his death and the rest of which are now ready for publication. During his

3. For a more detailed list of Afshar’s work see: Bahak Afshar, et al., Fehrest-e Mawzu’i az Chapkardah-ha va Neveshtah-ha-ye Iraj Afshar [A Subject Bibliography of Iraj Afshar’s Writings and Publications] (Los Angeles, 1382 š./2003), 20–24.
retirement days, he continued writing books and articles as well as attending national conferences on Iranian studies, manuscript studies, and bibliography. Remaining persistent in writing and publishing opinions and essays in his areas of interest, especially in the cultural bimonthly Bukhara, Afshar continued his academic contributions by managing the uninterrupted publishing, completing, and finalizing of the series Bibliography of Articles in Persian.

Broadly speaking, before he died Afshar had written nearly 300 books and over 2,000 scholarly articles on Iranian studies, codicology, bibliography, cataloguing, indexing, ancient Persian manuscript studies, Qajar studies, and biographies and cultural studies. Afshar was also a frequent essay writer and he contributed critiques, opinions, and scholarly papers on contemporary Iranian cultural figures and non-Iranian Iranologists. The list of Afshar’s miscellaneous writings includes book reviews, introductions, critics, suggestions and recommendations on the study of historical documents, pieces on historical geography, archaeology, and travelogue studies. Afshar has also contributed to the body of Persian language literary works as well as writings in the mystical tradition with special emphasis on principles of literature and the Persian language.

Considering the range and diversity of Afshar’s works, one may conclude that Iraj Afshar was a generalist who engaged in widely dispersed areas of pursuit. However, a more meticulous consideration of what Afshar has published and accomplished shows that the continuous pearl string holding together the succession of all the pieces of Afshar’s contributions is nothing but cultural knowledge production in the field of Iranian studies. The preeminence Afshar grants to secondary and tertiary reference sources such as a bibliography of bibliographies, various types of bibliographic lists, indexes, and catalogues, have every so often opened, unfolded, and sometimes even paved the way for Iranian studies researchers. Afshar’s personal efforts in the area of initiating and expanding production of tertiary sources and his specific methodological choices and coordinating strategies deserve a study on its own within the subject of cultural information science. Afshar’s expertise and personal knowledge of the history and prominent figures of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution.
period onward has specially contributed to the richness of cultural knowledge and information produced on this period. The gathering and publishing of collective information from various sources on the life of Sayyed Hassan Taqizadeh (1878–1970), for example, having great value for the knowledge it produces on this prominent leader of the Constitutional Movement, is one of the most notable projects Afshar conducted in the area of contemporary cultural knowledge production in the form of secondary sources. Although Afshar’s collection of writings, notes, remarks, and references gathered on Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq (1882–1967) does not compare to his research on Taqizadeh, it is without a doubt another example of Afshar’s immense accomplishments in the realm of contemporary cultural information science and knowledge production.

Another, less recognized aspect of Afshar’s cultural and intellectual activities was his work as a consultant providing cultural research recommendations and professional advice to a considerable number of Iranian studies scholars, Iranian and foreign institutions of Iranian studies, institutions that compile bibliographies, Persian and non-Persian manuscript studies research, and codicology projects. Afshar as an adviser has guided and helped shape countless research projects, academic dissertations, cultural symposia, academic conferences, information queries, and search query projects. In doing so, Afshar has an impressive share in the theoretical literature and discourses surrounding the aforementioned projects. At the same time, Afshar was always active as an intermediary, connecting research trends in Iranian Studies in Iran and outside the country. The leading influential role Afshar assumed at every moment of his career will remain comparatively unknown unless those who benefited from working with him publish their accounts of Afshar and his achievements.

Mohsen Baqerzadeh has published a tribute book honouring the life and work of Afshar, revealing some critical aspects for a more lucid understanding of Afshar and his accomplishments.4 Kambiz Eslami, the coordinator of the Integrated Library System at Princeton University, also edited a collection of writings in commemoration of Afshar’s work and achievements in a Festschrift titled Iran and Iranian Studies:

Essays in Honor of Iraj Afshar published in 1998. This collection includes twenty-one articles in English and French by Iranian studies experts and several Iranian professors teaching at universities outside Iran. In addition, Seyyed Farid Qāssemi has celebrated the life and writings of Afshar as a journalist, columnist, critic, and essayist who wrote frequently in the print media of Iran. Qāssemi’s book, The Iranologist Contributor: The Life and Career of Iraj Afshar in Iranian Print Media (1389 š./2011), is a record of nearly sixty years of Afshar’s contributions to a variety of cultural Persian-language print media.

Iraj Afshar was one of the few explorers who traveled all over Iranian territory and across to the Persian-speaking areas outside the borders of contemporary Iran and into the territory of Iranian Cultural Continent. Afshar traveled on foot, by car, or by using other means of transportation; sometimes with local guides and sometimes alone as a well-read, well-informed traveler who put to use his own previous studies on these areas to produce more knowledge of their values in his note-takings, articles, essays, and photos that he took and published in various publications. His observations and writings on the great Iranian Cultural Continent in some ways are the firsthand accounts and primary sources of greater Iran area studies, local histories, and travel guides.

Afshar’s detailed scientific methodologies and comprehensive research in his field of expertise became more apparent over time with his increasing knowledge and experience. Afshar, known to be an impartial scholar, always managed to provide an accurate representation of any of the projects he conducted. Afshar was remarkably professional and objective when dealing with opposing criticism of his work or his views and those who commented on him, whether personal or unbiased, and his critics were always treated fairly in corresponding or comparable research writings that Afshar had written on their works and views.

Afshar was a member of the Supreme Council of the Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopaedia (CGIE) and besides participating in this center’s research programs, particularly in the area of Iranian studies, he coordinated and supervised the library and document system and various library activities and programs at this center. Afshar donated his personal library, a rich collection particularly in the field
of bibliographic and Iranian studies, to the CGIE. Afshar’s personal collection includes approximately thirty thousand handwritten and print manuscripts. Included in the collection, aside from books, bound manuscripts, prints, journals, and periodicals, are about six thousand items such as pamphlets, documents, monographs, handbooks, dissertations, and disquisitions that come from a variety of collections and publications, many of which contain valuable and rare pieces of information. Afshar also donated over ten thousand photographs that he took of prominent figures, architectural structures, historical monuments, and landscapes. A number of these photographs are exceptionally unique and are valuable image sources. Afshar included in the donation package roughly one hundred thousand letters, some of which have great historical and literary value, from contemporary figures, non-Iranian Iranologist and Iranian cultural figures from various affiliations. Afshar also donated to the CGIE sets of library collections that he himself had inherited from notable Iranian historical figures including Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh and Allahyar Saleh, containing many valuable historical and research materials.  

Afshar signed a number of his articles and writings with pseudonyms. Some of his pennames are Sasan, Karim Mohammadi, and signature abbreviates such as A. Afshar and A. A.  

Iran Afshar, after a battle with cancer of the blood for several months, died on 18 Esfand 1389/ March 8, 2011 in Tehran. Large numbers of friends, admirers, and cultural and academic figures attended Afshar’s funeral ceremony. Afshar is buried in his family burial chamber.  

7. This information about the donation of Taqizadeh and Saleh’s library collection is from an oral conversation with Enayatoallah Majidi, the director for the central library of the Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia.  

8. Abbas Moafi, Nam hâ-yé Mo’aser-e Nevisandegian va Shârârân-e Mo’aser-e Irân (The pseudonyms of contemporary Iranian writers and poets) (Tehran: Amirkabir, 1381 š./2002 š.).