

Original Paper

An Ecocritical Study of Gary Snyder's Translation of Han Shan

Poetry

Hongyue Ding¹

¹ School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

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Abstract

Gary Snyder, a contemporary American ecological poet, is deeply influenced by East-West ecological wisdom, forming his own unique ecological philosophy. Gary Snyder's ecological philosophy influences his selection of poems to translate and translation methods in his English translation of Han Shan poetry. In turn, Gary Snyder's translation also promotes the formation of his ecological philosophy to a certain extent. Faced with the increasingly serious ecological crisis, this study attempts to examine Gary Snyder's translation of Han Shan poetry from the ecocritical perspective, exploring its ecological connotations and values from three aspects: translation selection, translation methods, and translation impact. The ecocritical study in this article aims to insert an ecological dimension to the study on English translation of poetry, and give advice to the strategy "Chinese Culture Going Global", especially "Chinese Ecological Culture Going Global".

Keywords

ecocriticism, Gary Snyder, English translation of Han Shan poetry

1. Introduction

1.1 Gary Snyder and Han Shan Poetry

The poet Han Shan and his poems have long been neglected by the world in the history of Chinese poetry. In 1958, when the young American poet Gary Snyder published 24 translated poems of Han Shan in *Evergreen Review*, the poet Han Shan was instantly sought after by the young generation in the United States, and Han Shan poetry were more widely disseminated in the United States.

Gary Snyder is a famous American ecological poet, ecological thinker, translator, Zen believer and environmentalist in the 20th century. His outstanding ecological writing has attracted wide attention in the American literary circle. Snyder is the most effective American poet to translate Chinese ancient poetry after Ezra Pound and Kenneth Rexroth. During his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, he began to study classical Chinese literature under the guidance of the famous Sinologist Shih-Hsiang

Chen, thus beginning a period of trans-temporal relationship with Han Shan. Snyder has made an indelible contribution to the translation and dissemination of Han Shan poetry, and it is precisely because he met Snyder that Han Shan was able to “travel” all over the world. Ou Hong (1994, p. 33) once analyzed that Snyder’s translation of Han Shan Poetry was the most far-reaching, perhaps because his own actions and thoughts at that time were an American Han Shan. Gary Snyder has long been regarded as the Beat poet with the greatest creative achievements since the break up of the Beat, and is almost the only Beat voice who has a say in “today” (Zhao, 2003, p. 73).

1.2 Ecocriticism

As a green research method and perspective, ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between man and nature. It has its roots in literary studies as “criticism of the relationship between literature and the natural environment” (Glotfelty & Fromrn, 1996, p. 106). Ecocriticism is defined by Scott Slovic as “the examination of ecological implications and the relationship between man and nature in literary texts or other texts” (2000, p. 160), which makes clear that the scope of ecocriticism is not limited to literature. Later, the scope of ecocriticism was extended to cultural criticism. As a kind of literary and cultural criticism, ecocriticism has the main task of showing its ontological characteristics and unique value, that is, to review human culture and conduct cultural criticism through literature—to explore how human thought, culture and social development model affect and even determine human attitude and behavior toward nature, and how to lead to environmental deterioration and ecological crisis (Wang, 2002, p. 49). We can explore “the relationship between man and nature in all areas of cultural production” (Garrard, 2012), and obviously, translating is one of them. Translation studies from the perspective of ecocriticism use ecological discourse to explain some translated texts, behaviors, phenomena or problems, and explore the relationship between human and nature involved in translation. Ecocriticism is the green reading of “value reconstruction” of literary or other artistic texts and cultural products, which will inevitably re-evaluate the texts and re-evaluate the works. Of course, such a re-evaluation and reading does not mean denying history, but giving a new interpretation of its contemporary value.

Chinese traditional culture contains rich ecological thoughts. Under the influence of this culture, Chinese ancient poetry undoubtedly has the imprint of ecological poetics. Therefore, it is necessary to apply ecocriticism to the study of Chinese poetry translation to explore the relationship between man and nature. In the face of the increasingly serious ecological crisis, this paper probes into the foreign translation of ancient poetry, analyzes Snyder’s Han Shan poetry from the perspective of ecocriticism, and explores its ecological connotation and value from three aspects: translation selection, translation method and translation impact.

2. Literature Review

As a kind of literary and cultural criticism, “ecocriticism” originated in the 1970s, took shape in the mid-1990s in the United States, and gradually spread and developed in many countries around the world. In 1978, William Rueckert was the first to use the critical term ecocriticism in his paper *Literature and*

Ecology: Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism, and he was the first to apply ecology and concepts related to ecology to literary research (Rueckert, 1978, p. 75). Since then, the concept of ecocriticism has been continuously developed and expanded in the United States, with increasing prosperity and influence.

The concept of ecocriticism was born in the background of the increasingly serious global environmental crisis, aiming to explore the relationship between literature and natural environment. Therefore, Wang Nuo (2009, p. 65) believes that its task is to enrich the ecological meaning of literature and reveal the ecological limitations of literature, so as to promote the establishment of ecological literary concepts and ecological aesthetic concepts, promote the formation and strengthening of ecological consciousness, and promote the construction of ecological civilization. Starting from its connotation, literature, as a result of human wisdom, promotes the formation of ecological consciousness and ideas, which is highly coincident with the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of “harmony between man and nature”. The relationship between heaven and man in Chinese philosophy contains rich and complex contents, but its most basic meaning is the relationship between man and nature (Fang, 2003, p. 211). In the view of Chinese philosophy, nature is a living organism, with the creation of life as its fundamental mode of existence and performance, while life is interdependent and constitutes a harmonious organic system (Meng, 2010, p. 7). Therefore, the introduction of traditional Chinese philosophy into ecocriticism has theoretical applicability.

Wang Nuo (2002, p. 52) pointed out that Chinese scholars have unique advantages in the development trend of ecocriticism, which provides a rare opportunity for Chinese scholars to enter the world academic forum. In the Chinese literature translation, the translation of Han Shan poetry in the United States is particularly special. Han Shan was a reclusive poet in the 7th century. His poems showed the joy of mountain forests and the idea of transcendence from the world, and embodied the traditional philosophy of China. Gary Snyder is an English translator of Chinese literature, and his translation of Tang poetry, especially Han Shan poetry, has had a wide and far-reaching influence in the English world, occupying an enduring literary classic status. The 24 Cold Mountain poems selected by Gary Snyder are basically zen poems about the unity of heaven and man, with profound philosophical colors (Bao, 2014, p. 67). Snyder’s translation of Han Shan poetry has both Chinese philosophical characteristics and Western influence. However, there are few studies on Snyder’s translation of Han Shan poetry from the perspective of ecocriticism. Therefore, with the help of ecocriticism, Snyder’s Han Shan poetry are appreciated from the perspective of ecocriticism, which presents a unique translation value.

3. Translation Selection

Compared with other major translators of Han Shan poetry, such as Arthur Waley, Burton Watson, Red Pine, and Robert Henricks, Gary Snyder has chosen to translate the smallest number of Han Shan poems, but his influence is probably the most far-reaching. His choice of Han Shan poetry text are “*The path to Han-shan’s place is laughable*”, “*In a tangle of cliffs, I chose a place*”, “*In the mountains it’s cold*”, “*I*

spur my horse through the wrecked town”, “*I wanted a good place to settle*”, “*Men ask the way to Cold Mountain*”, “*I settled at Cold Mountain long ago*”, “*Clambering up the Cold Mountain path*”, “*Rough and dark - the Cold Mountain trail*”, “*I have lived at Cold Mountain*”, “*Spring water in the green creek is clear*”, “*In my first thirty years of life*”, “*I can't stand these bird songs*”, “*Cold Mountain has many hidden wonders*”, “*There's a naked bug at Cold Mountain*”, “*Cold Mountain is a house*”, “*If I hide out at Cold Mountain*”, “*Most T'ien-t'ai men*”, “*Once at Cold Mountain, troubles cease*”, “*Some critic tried to put me down*”, “*I've lived at Cold Mountain - how many autumns*”, “*On top of Cold Mountain the lone round moon*”, “*My home was at Cold Mountain from the start*”, and “*When men see Han-shan*”.

It can be seen that most of the 24 Han Shan poems that Snyder selected to translate were poems that recited life in the mountains and depicted the natural scenery of the cold rocks. However, in Han Shan poetry, Snyder chose not to translate many poems of urging the world, advocating filial piety and a large number of common sayings full of fun.

In 1991, Snyder wrote in the introduction to *Beneath a Single Moon*: “My interest to creation led me to 20th century modernism and Chinese poetry; My thinking about nature and wilderness led me to Zen. My growing understanding of Zen was also intertwined with the discovery of Chinese landscape painting. I studied ancient Chinese with Peter Budeburg and Shih-Hsiang Chen at the University of California, Berkeley. From Professor Chen's lectures, I learned about the poet Han Shan and made some translations” (Johnson & Paulenich, 1991, p. 4). It can be seen that Snyder's choice of Han Shan poems is related to his own natural ecological view and his study of Zen. It is Snyder's natural ecological view that leads him to learn Zen and get closer to Han Shan as a poet.

Snyder's selection of texts is intentional, and he purposefully selects poems that are in line with his own ecological thoughts and poetics. In order to satisfy the young generation's desire for a different culture in American society at the time, Snyder incorporated his own life experience and imagination in the mountains of California. Snyder says in the preface to the translation that “this makes him a contemporary of Du Fu, Li Bai, Wang Wei, and Bai Juyi. More than 300 of his poems have survived, written in the colloquial language: plain and fresh. He and his partner Shi De became the favorite Zen paintings of later generations—volumes, brooms, tangled hair and laughter. They became immortals, and today you sometimes meet them in America's slums, orchards, homeless jungles and loggers' camps.” (Snyder, 1965, p. 33). It can be seen that Snyder seeks the fit with Han Shan from the poor working people living in the bottom society of the United States, and also seeks the fit between himself and Han Shan.

4. Translation Method

Through close reading of the translated poems, we find that Snyder's translation method has an ecological orientation, showing the ecological poetics features of seeing things in terms of things, and the integration of nature and man. It is deeply influenced by the organic view of nature in Eastern poetics, the thought of “anatman”, and the ecological concept of “everything as the same”. Although the translation differs greatly from the original, it will inevitably be accused of “disloyalty”, but from the perspective of

ecocriticism, it has unique ecological connotation and significance. On this point, we can learn from the relevant statements of “the subjectivity of human being” and “the agency of material” in ecocriticism.

4.1 *Aesthetics of Relinquishment*

Anthropocentrism is an ideological system fundamentally opposed to ecologism, and it is an anti-ecological idea that ecocriticism and the whole ecological trend of thought should be criticized first. Dehumanization requires us to reflect on human subjectivity and subvert the rule logic of “natural instrumentalism” and “human possessing nature” in the usual thinking. In response to this, eco-critic Buell pointed out the “aesthetics of relinquishment” in environmental writing, the most fundamental manifestation of which is the abandonment of the desire to rule oneself and the abandonment of human spiritual and physical alienation from nature (Buell, 1995, p. 143), that is, the abandonment of human subjectivity. Since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in the West, primitive pantheism and animism have been suppressed by humanistic reason, capitalized “Man” has become the only subject in literature and art, and the subjectivity of nature has been dispelled. The “aesthetics of relinquishment” is to set the arrogant “Man” back to nature in literature and art, and let him re-experience the emotions of an ordinary member in the ever-changing nature, so as to realize the limitations of himself and return to nature with reverence.

Original Text: 杳杳寒山道，落落冷涧滨。

啾啾常有鸟，寂寂更无人。

淅淅风吹面，纷纷雪积身。

朝朝不见日，岁岁不知春。

Translation: Rough and dark—the Cold Mountain trail,

Sharp cobbles—the icy creek bank.

Yammering, chirping—always birds,

Bleak, alone, not even a lone hiker.

Whip, whip—the wind slaps my face,

Whirled and tumbled—snow piles on my back.

Morning after morning, I don't see the sun,

Year after year, not a sign of spring.

The original poem presents to the reader a scene of deep silence, cold, and rare human habitation, with a strong sense of picture. Snyder uses visual processing method to conceptualize the picture in his mind, reproduce the scene in the translation, and also rewrite it to a certain extent. For example, Snyder chose to translate the Han Shan poetry in free style, and re-created the sentence pattern, omitted the rhyme of the original poem, and even omitted the first connectives and predicate verbs in many places. Start with an adjective or participle (rough, dark, bleak, alone, yammering, chirping, whirled, tumbled), each image is preceded by an adjective describing its state, multiple images are juxtaposing, which undoubtedly caters to the American tradition of image juxtaposition and open and free poetics created since the new poetry movement and readers' aesthetic habits inherited from it.

The reduplicated word “杳杳” in the original poem refers to darkness, which has been translated into “rough and dark”; “落落” refers to the appearance of silence and cold, which has been translated into “sharp cobbles”; and “淅淅” is an onomatopoeitic word referring to the wind, which has been translated into “the wind slaps my face”, with creative changes. When the translator presents the picture of the original poem in his mind, he adds his own life experience, then the cold and quiet picture of the cold mountain in the ancient poem will add the familiar features of the rugged western mountains of the United States. The last sentence is the punchline, “朝朝不见日，岁岁不知春”. The translator reproduces the “intuitive environment” of the poem by literal translation, expressing the poet’s indifferent mood of being detached from the world and unaware of the cold and hot days in the world. While creatively rewriting the artistic conception of the original poem, the inner spirit expressed by the poem is also obvious.

4.2 *Emphasis of Agency*

The “aesthetics of relinquishment” aims at dispelling the human subjectivity in the text, while the non-human nature subjectivity is highlighted, thus bringing about the rise of the “power of material” in ecocriticism. The new materialism feeds the rhetoric of material ecocriticism, emphasizing that “agency” is not unique to human beings, but is shared by material, and that both human and non-human nature are material (Tang, 2016, p. 116). “Agency” generally means the ability to take action. Cai Zhenxing (2019, p. 86) believes that material agency in ecological discourse refers more to a relationship in which people and others refer to and influence each other. The theory of “agency” changes the subjectivity of man into the intersubjectivity of man and nature, dispelling the idea of dualism from the root and counters anthropocentrism.

In describing the “agency” of material, material eco-critics support the anthropomorphism approach to nature, because while demonstrating the diversity of life, it also allows us to recognize the commonalities of different physical forms in nature and culture, thus allowing us to listen to the voices of non-human nature and to feel the communion of material elements between human and non-human nature. Snyder intended to personify nature in his translations, such as “A hill of pines hums in the wind” in poem 1, “Woods in the dark ravines spitting mist” in poem 3, “The pine sings, but there’s no wind” in poem 8, and so on. Of course, in the above cases, the original poem can also be regarded as using anthropomorphism, and the translator is only faithfully translating it.

However, Snyder’s preference for anthropomorphism can be more clearly demonstrated by some translations that do not use anthropomorphism in the original text. For example, in the English translation of Han Shan Poem No. 9, “淅淅风吹面” is translated as “Whip, whip - the wind slaps my face”, and the original “风吹面” is personalized as “wind slaps my face”. It is precisely because of this personification that Zhong Ling points out that the words chosen in Snyder’s translation are “far stronger and bolder than the original” and are filled with Snyder’s own experience of life in the mountains of North America (Zhong, 1995, p. 25).

For another example, in “*The path to Han-shan’s place is laughable*”, the poet gives an objective description of the rugged and difficult road in the mountains. The fifth sentence of the original poem “泣

露千般草” is translated as “A thousand grasses bend with dew”, adding the anthropomorphic action image “bend”, which integrates the poet’s strong and repressed feelings in the description of the scenery. In contrast, the original poem only describes the dew on the grass like tears, and does not mean that the grass is bent by the dew. It can be seen that “bend” has the translator’s subjective feelings.

In “*Clambering up the Cold Mountain path*”, the first six sentences of the original poem describe a series of images such as streams, grass, moss, pines, etc., and then lament how few people can go beyond the world, expressing the poet’s detached and open mind. The third sentence “溪长石磊磊” is translated as “The long gorge choked with scree and boulders”. The translated poem adds the anthropomorphic action image “choked”. One can feel Snyder’s strong reaction of being suffocated by the imprisonment of American thought at that time, obviously with strong subjective emotions.

5. Translation Impact

For Snyder, translation and his ecological thought show a close relationship that influences and constructs each other. His ecological philosophy influenced his translation of Han Shan poetry into English, and made his translated poems present unique meanings and values, which in turn contributed to the construction of his complex and diversified ecological philosophy.

Snyder has admitted that he encountered Chinese poetry “through translation” when he was 19 years old, and according to relevant sources, Chinese poetry here is referring to Han Shan poetry. The 24 Cold Mountain poems he translated were popular in the United States, and Han Shan, a lonely poet, became as famous as Li Bai, Du Fu and Bai Juyi in the United States. Taking this as an opportunity, Snyder began to study Zen, the belief of Han Shan, to explore the source of the spiritual power of the Han Shan, and traveled to East Asia to learn Zen in the 1950s and 1960s. After returning to China, Snyder actively participated in the environmental protection movement and promoted the concept of ecological civilization, becoming the standard-bearer of ecological literature in the United States. It can be seen that Han Shan poetry has triggered and guided Snyder to change his concept of nature and finally join the ecological movement.

In the winter of 1981, when the Chinese scholar Zhao Yiheng asked Snyder about the extent of Chinese culture’s influence on him, Snyder answered without hesitation: “In the 1950s and 1960s, it was 80 percent”, and this was the period when Snyder translated Han Shan poetry and then tried to explore the inner world of Han Shan. Therefore, we have reason to believe that it is precisely under the catalyst of Han Shan poetry that Snyder firmly believes in the harmonious coexistence between man and nature, and vigorously criticizes the anthropocentrism of traditional Western culture, replacing it with the ecological civilization of harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

Snyder has a deep admiration for classical Chinese culture. In the interpretation of his works, Snyder skillfully combines his personal views with Chinese Zen and the artistic conception of Chinese classical poetry, thus making his writing style unique and eye-catching in the American poetry circle.

Snyder translates “人问寒山道，寒山路不通” into “Men ask the way to Cold Mountain, Cold Mountain: there’s no through trail.” The “道” of Han Shan not only refers to the “road” of surface meaning, but also contains the “way” of deep meaning. Snyder replaces concrete words such as “path” and “trail” with “way” in the translated language, thus conveying the mystery and profoundness of the original “道” to the greatest extent, but it is not without regret. According to Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching, “Tao can be Tao, but it is very Tao”. “Tao” is unspeakable, and what is said is not Tao. Similarly, the Zen accumulation in Tao is also difficult to understand. Snyder integrated his Zen feelings into his translation, so that Han Shan poetry manifested its unique style and charm in the translation and dissemination process, which had a positive impact on the communication of Chinese culture to the outside world.

6. Conclusion

The academic community has been debating the fidelity and style of eco-poet Gary Snyder’s “ecological” poetry translation, but the author believes that Snyder has been immersed in Chinese culture for decades, has in-depth research and understanding of Chinese poetry, and many distortions and mistranslations are intentional by him. Hu Anjiang, a famous scholar, once praised Snyder as a “thoughtful” cultural envoy who “creatively ‘misread’ Han Shan on the basis of his own country’s cultural model and poetic tradition, so that Han Shan poetry, as an ‘other’, obtained a legal identity in the host country and became a classic in its literary system” (Hu, 2005, p. 67). It can be seen that although Snyder’s translated poems has the elements of rewriting and creation, they promote the rebirth and spread of the natural poetics and ecological wisdom of Chinese ancient poetry in the English-speaking world.

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