

The Aesthetic Choice of David Hinton's Translation of Classical Chinese Rivers-and-Mountains Poetry

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Abstract: David Hinton's Sinology research and poetry translation work have made significant contributions to the dissemination of Chinese classical rivers-and-mountains poetry in the English speaking countries. Its aesthetic orientation and stylistic characteristics are mainly reflected in respecting and reproducing the exotic nature of the original poem, using contemporary English expression and poetic features, and translating unfamiliar poetry. These characteristics make his translation more contemporary in world literature, balancing fidelity and acceptability, successfully attracting the interest of English audiences and gaining recognition from peers. By integrating the artistic characteristics of rivers-and-mountains poetry and contemporary English poetry, Hinton has enhanced the ecological discourse power of rivers-and-mountains poetry and added new literary forms to Western ecological culture and art. This indicates that the cross-cultural dissemination of traditional ethnic culture needs to be elucidated and retranslated from a contemporary perspective to enhance its modernity, form new discourse with positive significance, and promote the exchange and cross development of Eastern and Western civilizations.

Keywords: David Hinton; Chinese Classical Rivers-and-Mountains Poetry; Translation; Aesthetic Choice

David Hinton (1954-), a renowned American sinologist, translator, and poet, has dedicated himself to conveying the beauty of Chinese classical rivers-and-mountains poetry to the West. Through his profound understanding and unique insights, Hinton's translations have enabled Western readers to appreciate the charm of these poetic works. This study delves

into Hinton's translations, examining language and imagery choices, contrasting the original poems with their translated versions, and investigating his translation strategies and techniques. Special attention is given to how Hinton recreates the original poems' rhythm, meter, and meaning in English, as well as his approach to handling natural landscapes, cultural landscapes, and emotional expressions. This research aims to enhance understanding of Chinese classical landscape poetry and Hinton's translation style, thereby fostering cross-cultural communication.

1. Linguistic Aesthetic Choices in Hinton's Translations of Chinese Classical Landscape Poetry

The allure of ancient Chinese poetry lies in its inherent artistic conception and spiritual essence, which are further enhanced by its external expressions in diction, prosody, structure, and poetic forms. David Hinton acknowledges that due to the phonological and poetic differences between Chinese and English, sacrifices in form are necessary to enhance readability in translation. His translated poems strive for Englishness and modernity, harmoniously blending the content of the original poems with the characteristics of English to exhibit an organic translated poetic style that resonates with readers' aesthetic sentiments. As he states in the preface to his anthology, *The Selected Poems of Du Fu* regarding his translation methodology: "I have sought to convey faithfully the content of Du Fu's poetry without striving for a slavish imitation of its forms or language. The linguistic structures of classical Chinese poetry and English poetry differ greatly, and my translation aims to create English structures that echo the original. Regarding the ambiguities in the poetry, I have transformed them into new forms of expression rather than eliminating them. My translation endeavors to

present Du Fu as a modern English poet. ^{[1]xv}

As Wang Ning has remarked, in the face of the “conflict, negotiation, and coordination” between different national cultures, translation can play a “mediating role,” facilitating communication and understanding between various cultures ^{[2]9}. This mediating role balances cultural differences and promotes exchange and integration. In translating modern-style poetry, Hinton employs a double-line verse form, innovating in form while accurately conveying the meaning and charm of the original poems, thereby offering English readers a perspective close to the original and enabling them to appreciate their unique allure and cultural depth. Taking Hinton's translation of “Gazing at the Mountain” as an example:

1.1 Gazing at the Sacred Peak

What's this ancestor Exalt Mountain like?

An unending green of north and south, ethereal beauty Change-Maker distills where *yin* and *yang* split dusk and dawn. It breathes out banks of cloud. Birds clear my eyes vanishing home. One day soon, at the top, those other peaks will be small enough to hold, all in a single glance.

Hinton employs innovative methods to maintain consistent line rhythms and lengths, creating a neat and balanced poetic effect. He seamlessly blends tradition with modernity, preserving the charm of ancient Chinese poetry while integrating contemporary rhythms, thereby recreating the exotic sentiment and aesthetic beauty of the original poems. The poetic structure of his translations inherits the tradition of English free verse, offering English readers a novel aesthetic experience that resonates with the original works while also introducing fresh perspectives. David Hinton has praised Hinton's translations as “refreshing,” stating that these ancient poems “feel so fresh and modern” ^[3] back cover. The term “fresh” here is a testament to Hinton's respect for and precise recreation of the foreignness of the original poems. He provides English readers with a perspective closer to the original, enabling them to engage in new dialogues with the works.

In translating poetic lines, Hinton accords significant attention to each character in the original poem, adopting a cultural connotative approach of translating word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase, ensuring that the meaning of every character in the title and every phrase in

the poem is conveyed. Let us illustrate this with some examples of title translations:

《宿建德江》 Overnight on Abiding-Integrity River

《夜归鹿门歌》 Returning Home to Deer-Gate Mountain at Night

《鸟鸣涧》 Bird-Cry Creek

《长干行》 Ch'ang-Kan Village Song

《玉阶怨》 Jade-Staircase Grievance

《赠卫八处士》 “For the Recluse Wei Pa

《酬张少府》 In Reply to Vice-Magistrate Zhang

When translating the titles of Chinese classical landscape poetry, Hinton tends to adopt descriptive literal translation, respecting the ideographic nature of Chinese characters and the exoticism of Chinese cultural expressions. This approach not only conveys the literal meaning but also emphasizes the cultural connotations, contributing to the exhibition of the unique linguistic and cultural traits of Chinese. For instance, “建德江” is translated as “Abiding-Integrity River,” and “广陵” as “Yang-chou,” both exemplifying culturally nuanced translations. Hinton's word-for-word and phrase-for-phrase literal translation strategy embodies his concept of “cultural translation,” alienating the titles and offering English readers a novel aesthetic experience. His use of precise, simple, and straightforward language, with a particular emphasis on the recreation of cultural terms, manifests a serene and indifferent poetic quality. Let us examine his translation of Wei Yingwu's *Autumn Night, Sent to Ch'iu Tan*:

1.2 Autumn Night, Sent to Ch'iu Tan

This autumn night become thoughts of you, I wander along, offer cold heaven a chant. In mountain emptiness, a pinecone falls. My recluse friend must not be asleep either.

Hinton's translation employs simple and unadorned language, effectively conveying the solitude, melancholy, and the elegant clarity embodied in Wei Yingwu's five-character quatrain. The phrase “空山” is rendered as “in mountain emptiness,” which vividly captures the Zen-inspired sense of emptiness and tranquility. The depiction of pinecones falling to the ground, a dynamic element amidst stillness, not only showcases the serene surroundings but also subtly hints at the hermit status of Qiu Dan. Through his translation, Hinton highlights the philosophical connotation

of “空” and accurately translates “幽人” into “recluse.” The footnote explaining the Buddhist and Zen connotations of “emptiness” further assists English readers in grasping Wei Yingwu’s solicitude towards his hermit friend and the ambiance of the reclusive life depicted in the poem.

2. Aesthetic Selection of Imagery in Hinton's Translations of Chinese Classical Rivers-and-Mountains Poetry

Landscape poets excel in utilizing concise and vivid language to portray the sights, sounds, and forms of nature through the delineation of imagery. They employ a rich combination of adjectives and nouns, or mere noun enumerations, to depict the wonders of the world. The vibrant use of color vocabulary creates stark contrasts in imagery, revealing unique atmospheres of tranquility versus vitality, brightness versus shadow, thereby evoking emotional resonance. Additionally, dynamic depictions showcase the surging and flowing beauty of nature, immersing readers in the very scene. The imagery-centric nature of rivers-and-mountains poetry has garnered significant attention in Anglo-American literary circles, enabling readers to profoundly experience the allure of natural beauty.

Tong Qingbing observes that Chinese imagery emphasizes “aesthetic ideals,” whereas Western imagery focuses on the “image” of objects, reflecting the distinct characteristics of Chinese and Western poetics ^{[4]305}. Yu Baolin argues that Western literary imagery stems from imitation, whereas Chinese poetry represents the direct response and record of the poet’s engagement with the world, embodying a close relationship between the poet and nature ^{[5]145}. Therefore, comprehending Chinese poetry necessitates an attention to the fusion of the poet’s emotions with nature, giving birth to unique imagery and artistic conception. Hinton delves into the mindset prevalent in ancient artistic creations, which “is always rich in lyrical beauty and, at the same time, exhibits a distinct modernity and radicality for us” ^[6]. In his translations, he endeavors to simulate natural imagery through literal translation, faithfully conveying the aesthetic sensibilities of the original works while preserving the imagery-based essence of landscape poetry in cross-cultural communication. This approach fosters cultural understanding and appreciation.

Hinton himself underscores that “what is translated is not just Chinese words but Chinese culture” ^[7]. Taking Hinton's Translation of *Magnolia Slope* as an Example:

2.1 Magnolia Slope

Lotus blossoms adrift out across treetops flaunt crimson calyxes among mountains. At home beside this stream, quiet, no one here. Scattered. Scattered open and falling.

Magnolia slope, a valley in Wangchuan named after the magnolia flowers, finds its poetic expressions imbued with the Zen philosophy of all things existing contentedly and beauty residing in nature. In his translation, Hinton deftly employs phrases such as “adrift out” and “flaunt” to highlight the carefree state of the magnolia flowers, while “crimson calyxes” vividly portrays their resplendent hues. The subsequent lines featuring “quiet” and “no one” underscore their natural growth amidst undisturbed tranquility. The rhetorical use of commas and end-weight placement enhances the atmosphere of serenity, thereby intensifying the Zen ambiance. Furthermore, Hinton ingeniously utilizes English reduplication “Scattered. Scattered open and falling” to mirror the original poem’s “纷纷” conveying the magnolia flowers’ free-falling natural state as a standalone sentence. Through these linguistic devices, Hinton explicitly reveals the implicit Zen sentiments embedded in the original poem, imbuing the translation with the aesthetic appeal of English poetry. This may enable English readers to perceive the tranquility and emptiness of the poet’s contemplation on the natural cycle of life, as well as to comprehend the natural laws governing the cycle of life and the birth and death of all things.

Similarly, in Hinton’s translation of *Magnolia Park*:

2.2 Magnolia Park

Autumn mountains gathering last light, one bird follows another in flight away. Shifts kingfisher-green flash radiant scatters. Evening mists: nowhere they are.

Wang Wei possessed a keen eye for capturing light and color, meticulously portraying the wonders of nature through his poetry. His works conveyed a realm of transcendence from worldly affairs, pursuing inner peace and enlightenment, resonating with Zen Buddhist philosophy. In translating these poems, Hinton

employs the absolute phrase construction alongside the main clause to reproduce the scenery, for instance, translating “敛余照” (gathering the last rays of sunlight) into “gathering last light,” imbuing it with poetic charm, and rendering “follows another in flight” vividly to capture the essence. Additionally, she translates “夕岚” (evening mist) into “evening mists,” vividly depicting the misty mountains shrouded in the afterglow. Overall, the translated poem presents a panorama of autumn mountains at dusk, with birds returning home amidst the flickering light and mist, seamlessly blending into the evening haze.

Hinton employs literal translation techniques to mimic natural imagery, creating an aesthetic distance that estranges the English reader and enhances the literary quality of the translation. This approach preserves the original poem’s literary value and artistic charm, offering a rich and challenging aesthetic experience that reflects the translator’s respect for, understanding of, and unique aesthetic pursuit in the source text.

Landscape poets depict natural scenery, expressing their love and insights while revealing feelings of solitude and melancholy. The interplay between emotion and nature endows their poetry with profound ideological depth and artistic charm. The sense of loneliness is a reflection of the poets’ inner worlds, manifested in their immersion in and fusion with the natural landscape. It showcases their isolation from the world, confronting the beauty of nature alone.

Here, we take Hinton’s translation of *At West Creek in Chu-Chou* as an illustrative example:

2.3 At West Creek in Chu-Chou

Alone, I savor wildflowers tucked in along the creek, And there’s yellow oriole singing in treetop depths. Spring floods come rain-swollen and wild at twilight. No one here at the ferry, a boat drifts across of itself.

Hinton’s translations of poetry emphasize solitude and desolation, effectively capturing the original poetic atmosphere through words such as “alone,” “wildflowers,” and “come rain-swollen and wild.” The translated poems feature simple vocabulary and distinct rhythms, presenting a serene and secluded image of the wilderness. Through Hinton’s introduction to

the poetic style of Wei Yingwu, readers may gain insight into its tranquility, simplicity, and clarity, as well as the Zen-like philosophy and introspective solitude embedded within the poems. Furthermore, readers come to understand that the serene landscapes depicted are, in fact, projections of the poet’s inner world, embodying his profound emotions. This deeper comprehension reveals how the quietude of the scenery serves as a metaphor for the poet’s soul, where he finds solace and expresses his innermost thoughts and feelings.

3. Aesthetic Orientation and Stylistic Characteristics of Hinton’s Translations of Chinese Classical Rivers-and-mountains Poetry

In translating Chinese classical rivers-and-mountains poetry, Hinton displays a unique aesthetic orientation and stylistic features. He innovatively transforms the artistic form and essence of landscape poetry, skillfully employing a blend of foreignization and hybridization translation techniques, thereby endowing the translated poems with distinctive aesthetic characteristics and formal beauty.

Firstly, Hinton adopts a neatly aligned couplet syntax to mirror the original poetic structure. This uniformity imparts a sense of symmetry and rhythm to the translated poems, while his word-for-word literal translation method enables English readers to access the imagery and emotional expressions of the original poems more intimately.

Secondly, Hinton employs a concise and elegant style in word choice and sentence construction, utilizing succinct vocabulary and sentences to convey the mood and sentiment of the original poems. This terse linguistic style renders the translations with a freshness and naturalness that aligns with contemporary English aesthetic preferences.

Furthermore, Hinton pays particular attention to the imitation and recreation of the original poetic imagery. By accurately capturing the natural landscapes, cultural landscapes, and emotional expressions in the source poems, he translates them into corresponding imagery and sentiments in English poetry. This imagery imitation technique enables the translated poems to closely approximate the emotions and atmosphere of the originals.

These formal handling techniques strike a balance between adequacy and accessibility,

achieving a harmonious translation. On one hand, Hinton's innovative translation approach demonstrates respect for and reproduction of the exotic nature of the original poems, bringing contemporary English readers closer to their essence. On the other hand, Hinton's translations also embody contemporary English expressiveness and poetic characteristics, aligning with the hypothetical notion of equivalence in the translation of ancient Chinese poetry within the contemporary Anglo-American literary sphere and among readers. This hypothetical equivalence concept involves preserving the fundamental meaning and emotions of the original while leveraging the characteristics of the English language to create a text that is similar yet not identical to the original. It does not mandate a literal correspondence but rather presents the artistic value and cultural connotations of the original through contemporary English expression and poetic features.

Moreover, Hinton's translated poems exhibit a straightforward and unadorned linguistic style. He conveys the emotions and atmosphere of the original poems through concise and clear language, avoiding overly complex or ornate expressions. This direct linguistic approach makes the translations more accessible and comprehensible to English readers, thereby further expanding the influence of Chinese classical landscape poetry in the English-speaking world.

4. Conclusion

In translating Chinese classical rivers-and-mountains poetry, Hinton demonstrates a profound respect and recreation of the exotic elements in the original poems, while seamlessly integrating contemporary English expressiveness and poetic characteristics. By employing defamiliarization techniques, he endows his translations with a contemporary global literary relevance. Burton Watson has commented that Hinton's translations remain faithful to both the content and poetic nature of the originals, showcasing the imagination and effectiveness of English poetry. Striking a balance between adequacy and acceptability, Hinton's translations have piqued the interest of English audiences and garnered recognition from experts. By fusing the art of landscape poetry with contemporary

English poetry, his translations enhance the ecological discourse and present the ancient Chinese rivers-and-mountains poetry to the English world with a modern ecological cultural charm, contributing an unfamiliar literary form to Western ecological culture.

The cross-civilizational turn in translation signifies that people are now more "concerned with the intersections and connections between civilizations, rather than solely focusing on the center of a particular 'civilization'" [8]¹¹⁵. The cross-cultural dissemination of national traditional cultures necessitates elucidation and translational rewriting from a contemporary discourse perspective, thereby elevating the modernity of cultural discourse and forming new narratives that positively contribute to the development of human civilization. This, in turn, fosters connections and intersections between Eastern and Western civilizations.

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