

# On the Chinese Translation Strategies under Eco-translatology

-- A Case Analysis of Huang Yuanshen's Translation of Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*

Yuhang Gu<sup>1</sup>, Zhulin Han<sup>1, 2, \*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Applied English, Mudanjiang Normal University, Mudanjiang, Heilongjiang, China

<sup>2</sup> School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

\* Corresponding author: Zhulin Han

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**Abstract:** Building on the theoretical approach of Eco-translatology, the paper analyses the translation strategies used by Huang Yuanshen in his Chinese translation of 《归宿》 (*To the Islands*) through linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. It can be found that, linguistically, Huang uses a multi-dimensional strategy that involves syntactic domestication together with imagistic foreignization via Chinese paratactic constructions for the poetic features of the source text. Culturally, Huang applies a combination strategy of “domestication in the title and foreignization in the main text” in dealing with the Indigenous Australian cultural references and Christian discourses, while Taoism views about nature are indirectly incorporated into the Chinese translation. Communicatively, ritual-like sentences with repetitive rhythms are utilized for bridging the writer's intention with the audience. The study demonstrates that Huang achieves dynamic adaptation between the source-language and target-language ecologies, enabling the original work to successfully “survive” and “grow” within the Chinese literary ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Eco-translatology; Three-dimensional Transformations; *To the Islands*; Translation Strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

Written in 1958, Australian author Randolph Stow's novel *To the Islands* takes place in the context of an Aboriginal mission station and the red earth landscape of northwestern Australia. The story depicts the spiritual journey of Stephen Heriot, an old missionary whose faith has been lost and whose escape from the confines of Christianity results in entry into the Aboriginal myth of the “Islands of the Dead,” and a Taoist like nature order, whereby he finds a spiritual “homecoming”. *To the Islands* is winner of the Miles Franklin Award and has been considered as one of the representative novels of Australian modernism. Huang Yuanshen points out: “However, people generally regard Stow as a distinctive writer. His novels vividly recreate the customs and local culture of Western Australia, and portray a number of characters with unique personalities who differ greatly from those found in traditional fiction. His evocative descriptions of scenes, frequent use of symbolism, and concise, lucid, rhythmically rich language endow his works with a deeply moving power.” (Huang, 2014: 286) In the 1980s, Chinese translator Huang Yuanshen translated the novel in Chinese language using the title of “归宿”. By avoiding a direct translation of the original title “To the Islands” to the Chinese title of “归宿” (ultimate destination / spiritual home), Huang has managed to reconstruct the ecological significance of the original in the Chinese literary tradition and has thus made this a remarkable case of translation.

Taking Huang Yuanshen's translation of *To the Islands* as the major object of research, this paper will explore the translation strategies adopted on the linguistic, cultural, and communicative levels respectively. In particular, the research will try to analyze how the translator achieves the “survival” and “growth” of the text within the complex target language ecology in the face of complicated source text ecology, and

what this can tell us about the essence of literary translation.

In order to do so, the study makes use of the theory of Eco-translatology developed by Hu Gengshen. According to this theory, the process of translation should be viewed from the perspective of “the Darwinian concept of ‘adaptation and selection’,” where “translation becomes a cycle where ‘the translator adapts to the translational eco-environment and makes adaptive selections.’” Here, the notion of the “translational eco-environment” refers to a multifactorial environment consisting not only of the natural linguistic environment but also of such factors as the source text, the source language culture, the target language culture, the target reader, the publishing environment, the ideological environment of the age, and the subjective consciousness of the translator.

Under such a model, translation quality is determined by “the degree of holistic adaptation and selection” or the ability of the translated text to survive, evolve, and be included into cycles of reading and recognition in the target language ecosystem under various dimensions of ecological pressure. This process of adaptation is carried out by means of the “three-dimensional transformations,” namely that of linguistic adaptation which involves phonological, semantic, syntactic, and rhythmic aspects of translation; that of cultural adaptation which relates to transplantation and recreation of cultural differences and symbols; and that of communicative adaptation, which covers author's intentions and readers' expectations.

The selection of Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* and Huang Yuanshen's translation as the research object provides an ideal case for demonstrating the explanatory power of Eco-translatology. Although Stow's novel is set in Western Australia, it is far more than a simple “Australian landscape novel.” Influenced by Lin Yutang's *My Country and My People* and English translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, Stow incorporates Taoist concepts such as “non-action” (无为),

“the natural state of innocence”(赤子), and “the unity of all things”(万物齐一) into the framework of Christian missionary narratives. Meanwhile, he directly explores the collision between the white missionary station and the Aboriginal mythology of the “Islands of the Dead.” Consequently, the ecological structure of the original text consists of at least four overlapping layers: natural ecology, cultural ecology, philosophical ecology, and stylistic ecology.

As one of the earliest Chinese scholars to pursue advanced study in Australia after China’s reform and opening-up period, and later a pioneer in Australian literary studies in China, Huang Yuanshen translated the novel within the specific context of the Chinese foreign literature field of the 1980s. Chinese readers at the time expected a sense of exoticism but were resistant to excessive annotation; publishers sought an “accessible Australian classic”; meanwhile, the Chinese cultural imagination attached a stronger geographical meaning to “island” than the Aboriginal symbolic meaning of a spiritual destination for the dead. These factors constituted the ecological pressures of the target-language environment.

## 2. Translation Ecology and the Translator’s Adaptive Positioning

### 2.1. The Source-text Ecology: Interwoven Tensions

The source-text ecology of *To the Islands* is first manifested through its “non-pastoral” representation of natural geography. The Western Australian landscape depicted by Stow is not the tourist-oriented scenery of blue skies and pristine oceans, but rather a wilderness characterized by scorching heat, the pungent smell of eucalyptus oil, and snakes hidden among rock crevices. Nature in the novel is not merely a backdrop; instead, it functions simultaneously as an adversary and a mother figure that dismantles Heriot’s sense of religious authority and selfhood. Linguistically, Stow frequently employs abrupt sentence breaks, accumulations of present participles, and sudden close-up descriptions of physical objects to place human beings and nature within the same observational space.

For example: “A child dragged a stick along the corrugated-iron wall of a hut, and Heriot woke. His eyes, not yet broken to the light, rested on the mud-brick beside his bed, drifted slowly upwards to the grass-thatched roof.” Through such narrative techniques, human consciousness and the natural environment are presented as mutually embedded rather than hierarchically opposed.

The second feature of the source-text ecology lies in the dual rupture of cultural systems. On one side of the cultural divide stands the missionary station, represented by clocks, prayers, registers, crosses, and colonial law; on the other side stands the Aboriginal world, represented by the Dreaming, songlines, and the non-spatial orientation of the Islands of the Dead. Stow neither adopts a purely white colonial perspective nor romanticizes Aboriginal culture. Instead, he allows Heriot to age, renounce his clerical identity, and gradually relinquish authority between these two cultural systems. The text therefore resists domination by any single cultural code.

The third feature is the philosophical ecology of “Taoist transition.” In Heriot’s later life, expressions such as “just animals,” “ashamed,” and “he had become its convert” repeatedly appear. The Christian command to “have dominion over the earth” is gradually replaced by a sense of unity with

all things, in which wind, stones, and lizards are all capable of becoming objects of spiritual devotion. This mode of thinking is not presented through explicit references to Laozi; rather, it emerges as a mediated product of Lin Yutang’s Western representation of Taoism combined with Stow’s experience of the Australian wilderness.

The final characteristic is the heteroglossic nature of the novel’s stylistic ecology. Heriot’s interior monologues carry the resonance of Ecclesiastes (“vanity, vanity”); the dialogue contains traces of colonial colloquial speech and Aboriginal pidgin English; while the third-person narration possesses the detached precision of a geological report. Any translation strategy that focuses on only one of these dimensions would inevitably lead to ecological reduction and imbalance.

### 2.2. The Target-language Ecology: The Chinese Literary Field of the 1980s

Hu Gengshen points out: “From the perspective of ‘adaptation’ and ‘selection’, the target text is the product of the translator’s adaptation and selection; without the translator’s adaptation and selection, there would be no target text.” (Hu, 2004: 14) When Huang Yuanshen undertook the translation of *To the Islands*, the Chinese field of foreign literary translation was shaped by three major forces. First was the expectation of readers. During the 1980s, intellectual trends such as the “Root-Seeking Literature movement” and the popularity of existentialist thought created a receptive context for themes such as “spiritual return” and “the absurdity of old age.” However, Australian colonial history and Aboriginal cosmology remained unfamiliar territories for Chinese readers. Excessive explanatory footnotes would have disrupted the fictional experience. Second were literary norms. Although Europeanized long sentences had already gained legitimacy through the translation traditions of writers such as Lu Xun and Fu Lei, excessive foreignization could still be criticized as “rigid translation.” Conversely, excessive domestication would eliminate the foreignness of the original work. Third, the positioning of the translator himself. Huang Yuanshen was not only a scholar but also a translator. Being the author of *A History of Australian Literature*, he had profound knowledge of Australian society and culture. Meanwhile, his translation theory was concerned with the expressive qualities of the Chinese language per se. Hence, his translation naturally gravitated towards “readable foreignness” as opposed to “shocking foreignness.”

In this ecological setting, the translator is an “ecological mediator”: he is expected not to let the specificities of Australian culture disappear into the familiar landscapes of the Chinese culture, and not to exclude Chinese readers from unfamiliar symbolic systems. The title “Gui Su” is a first significant adaptation act. It involves the transformation of “islands” from the geographical plural noun to a conceptual Chinese term “spiritual destination,” “spiritual home.” It allows him to dissociate himself from the tourist connotations of “islands,” and evoke Chinese cultural associations connected with “spiritual returning to roots,” “spiritual settlement.”

## 3. Analysis of Chinese Translation Strategies Under Three-dimensional Transformations

Hu Gengshen points out: “The translation methods of the approach of adaptation and selection can be briefly

summarized as 'three-dimensional' transformations, that is, under the principle of 'multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection,' they are relatively focused on adaptive selectional transformations in the linguistic dimension, the cultural dimension, and the communicative dimension." (Hu, 2004: 133)

### 3.1. The Linguistic Dimension: Syntactic Adaptation and the Preservation of Poetic Quality

Huang Yuanshen's translation of the opening passage of *To the Islands* demonstrates, at the linguistic dimension, a layered strategy that combines "syntactic domestication" with "imagistic foreignization." Through this strategy, the translator achieves a balance between the ecological conventions of Chinese and the poetic quality of the original.

**Source text:** A child dragged a stick along the corrugated-iron wall of a hut, and Heriot woke. His eyes, not yet broken to the light, rested on the mud-brick beside his bed, drifted slowly upwards to the grass-thatched roof. From a rafter an organ-grinder lizard peered sidelong over its pulsing throat. (Stow, 1984: 1)

**Translated text:** 一个孩子拖着一根木条, 扫过草屋的波纹铁皮墙壁时, 赫里奥特便醒了过来。他的双眼还没有完全睁开, 就已落在床边的泥砖上, 继而又缓缓地移往高处的茅草屋顶。横梁上一条巨蜥的目光越过其搏动的喉部斜睨着。 (Stow, 1993: 2)

At the syntactic level, the translator systematically reconstructs the complex structures of English in accordance with Chinese syntactic conventions. The first sentence of the source text is a compound sentence connected by *and*. Huang removes the conjunction and transforms the sentence into a typical Chinese paratactic structure: "一个孩子拖着一根木条, 扫过草屋的波纹铁皮墙壁时, 赫里奥特便醒了过来。" The temporal clause is introduced by "时" (when/as), while "便" (then/thereupon) reinforces the immediacy of the relationship between the preceding action and the resulting awakening. This restructuring conforms to the Chinese narrative tendency to establish a background situation before presenting its consequence.

The second sentence is an instance of a past-participial construction (not yet broken to the light) being converted into an independent clause: "他的双眼还没有完全睁开" ("his eyes had not yet fully opened"). By doing this, one prevents the proliferation of Europeanized attributive constructions that might arise as a result of literal translation (尚未适应光线的眼睛, "eyes that had not yet become accustomed to the light"). At the same time, the predicates *rested on... drifted slowly upwards* are translated by the connective structure "就已.....继而又....." ("had already... and then..."). The resulting sentence sequence goes from a quick fixation of sight to a slow drifting upwards, maintaining Heriot's gaze sequence and adhering to the progressive spatiality of Chinese descriptions. The prepositional phrase *From a rafter* in the third sentence is rendered as "横梁上" ("on the rafter").

At the level of imagery and vocabulary, Huang endeavors to retain the poetic nature of the original text, taking into account the sensitivities of the Chinese language. The violent imagery in the phrase *broken to the light* is translated into "还

没有完全睁开" ("had not yet fully opened"). Although the literal image of "breaking" is abandoned, the addition of "完全" ("fully/completely") suggests Heriot's semi-conscious state and thus achieves functional equivalence at the semantic level.

The phrase "rested on... drifted slowly upwards" is translated into "落在.....缓缓地移往。" The adverb "缓缓地" (slowly) is directly translated from the English *slowly* while carrying connotations of Heriot's aging and physical lethargy. *Organ-grinder lizard* is translated loosely into "巨蜥" (*goanna*/large lizard). However, at the same time, the alert and dangerous nature of the animal is maintained by translating *sidelong* into "斜睨" (glance sideways) and *pulsing* into "搏动。" The sentence ends with the expression "斜睨着," where the aspectual particle is used to create a continuous action instead of the static conclusion of the English sentence. This translation technique is better suited to the Chinese narrative style of ending a sentence with a dynamic verb.

Overall, Huang's translation shifts decidedly to the syntax of Chinese, favors contextual translation over formal equivalence in lexicography, and regulates the "frequency" between English and Chinese through the introduction of function words and pause redistribution at the rhythmical level. While this is happening, the tension and poetry of the original text are maintained. This is the perfect illustration of what Eco-translatology calls "holistic adaptation and selection": amidst many pressures exerted on the linguistic level of the ecosystem, the translator finds a way of equilibrium which allows the survival of the source text in the linguistic environment of Chinese without losing its poetic character.

### 3.2. The Cultural Dimension: A Dual-track Treatment of Aboriginal Symbols and Christian Discourse

The central challenge of cultural transformation lies in preserving the "otherness" of the source culture within the target-language ecology without allowing excessive foreignization to obstruct the reader's access to the text. The cultural ecology of Gui Su involves no less than three intertwined symbolic systems: Aboriginal cosmology, Christian theology, and Taoist philosophy of nature. The approach adopted by Huang Yuanshen can be described with two basic strategies: "domestication in the title and foreignization in the main text," and the simultaneous existence of two cultural lines.

The cultural translation of islands is the key moment in the transformation of culture in the book. In the context of Aboriginal cosmology, the islands are not mere archipelagos from the geographic point of view. They are the final destination of the dead after they have traveled along the songlines, and the end of the Dreaming. Should the title be rendered literally as *A Journey to the Islands*, the Chinese audience might easily regard it as an adventure tale or travelogue that revolves around islands.

Huang explains his choice of title in the following terms: "the original title of the book is *To the Islands* (literally translated as *A Journey to the Islands*), but it has been rendered as *Gui Su* (The Homecoming) in Chinese. There are three reasons for this choice: first, the protagonist's journey of redemption, which runs throughout the entire novel, ultimately aims at finding a spiritual destination; second, *To the Islands* carries the meaning of "heading toward one's

ultimate destination” in the language of the Indigenous people; and third, Gui Su is more evocative and distinctive in meaning, whereas *A Journey to the Islands* sounds more like the title of a documentary or travel narrative.” (Stow, 1993: 9)

In this way, Huang takes the title out of its direct geographical meaning and makes it into Gui Su, a Chinese word loaded with a powerful existential meaning. It has many meanings such as “returning to one’s root” and “restoration of spirit,” and this makes it possible for readers to be positioned into the horizon of “spiritual return” even before they start to read the novel.

At the same time, when islands of the dead occurs in the main text, Huang retains the more foreignized rendering “死亡之岛” (“Island of the Dead”), preserving the mystery and cultural otherness of Aboriginal cosmology. This dual approach of “domestication in the title and foreignization in the text proper” helps the translation reach its first level of adaptation in the target-language literary market – attracting people to buy and read the book – while bringing back cultural otherness through continuous reading and leading them into the Aboriginal world. In doing so, the translator is able to avoid the problem of losing Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness due to too much domestication and the problem of the text being rejected due to too much foreignization.

The implicit integration of Taoist modes of expression further demonstrates the sophistication of Huang’s cultural adaptation. Consider the following example:

**Source text:** Being so alone and in such chaos of air he could have shouted out to the wind that he loved it and worshipped it, that overnight he had become its convert, forestalling ruin by embracing ruin. (Stow, 1984: 43)

**Translated text:** 他是如此孤独。狂风怒号，他本可以对着狂风仰天长啸：他爱它，他崇拜它，告诉它一夜之间他成了它的信徒，为了阻止毁灭，他要拥抱毁灭。(Stow, 1993: 89)

The most significant element here is the treatment of the word convert. In Christian discourse, convert refers to someone who changes faith from one religion to another. However, when used by Stow, convert implies the change in the relationship a person has with nature—specifically, the wind and the wilderness—and thus becomes an interesting blend of the language of Christianity and the idea of nature in Taoism. Heriot does not convert to any church or God but rather converts to the wind, the wilderness, and destruction.

“信徒” in the translation keeps the shell of Christianity in the original word. Nevertheless, when read together with “对着狂风仰天长啸：他爱它，他崇拜它” (“he could shout toward the howling wind: he loved it, he worshipped it”), Chinese readers understand that there is an element of reverence of nature in it that goes beyond the worship of God of Christianity. Wind is not God, but rather it takes on the nature of the Dao or qi, an indefinable force born out of chaos.

Similarly, avoiding disaster through embracing disaster is translated as “为了防止毁灭，他必须拥抱毁灭” (“to prevent destruction, he must embrace destruction”). Using proper Chinese syntax, the translator brings out the paradoxical rhetoric in the original statement. In “拥抱” (“embrace”), there is the physical sense of intimacy and also the philosophical implication in the Taoist philosophy of

accepting the inseparable relationship between life and death and unification with all other things. It is clear that Heriot no longer refuses destruction; he wants to overcome destruction through acceptance.

This may be described as a case of “pouring new Taoist wine into an old Christian bottle.” The Taoist philosophy does not need to be explained by footnotes and explanations. Instead, the Taoist philosophy becomes part of the translated text by way of association. This makes it possible for a “dual-track existence” in the cultural dimension: The Christian symbolism remains intact even though the Taoist connotation emerges within the Christian context.

### 3.3. The Communicative Dimension: Bridging Authorial Intention and Reader Reception

At the communicative dimension, the central task is to reconstruct the author’s intention within the target-language environment. In the first chapter of *To the Islands*, Stow initiates Heriot’s crisis of body and spirit through a compound image of the broken mirror, shattered cliffs, and self-address. These three themes—the decline of Christian imagery, European literary intertextuality, and the environmental features of the Australian landscape—are intertwined in this passage. This makes it one of the most important places where the intention of the writer—to depict the modern man after the loss of faith—and the readers’ perception come together in order for us to realize why an old man who is a missionary considers himself a red cliff. Below we will compare this passage with that of Heriot.

**Source text:** And the mirror was broken, the wooden shutter of the window broken. Broken, broken. He saw himself as a great red cliff, rising from the rocks of his own ruin. I am an old man, an old man. (Stow, 1984: 2)

**Translated text:** 镜子破了，木制百叶窗坏了。都坏了，都坏了。他把自己看作一块巨大的红色巉岩，从岩石自身的废墟中拔地而起。我老了，老了。(Stow, 1993: 5)

The intention of the author is twofold. Firstly, the repetition of broken stands for the fractured consciousness of Heriot. Secondly, great red cliff acts as a double image – it points at once to the red cliffs of Western Australia and to Heriot’s spiritual precipice, drawing upon the image of the mind as a mountainous landscape.

The translation by Huang maintains the repetitive rhythm of the original English text in “都坏了，都坏了” (“broken, broken”) without using additional word “破碎的” (“fragmented” or “shattered”). In this way, Chinese readers receive access to the consciousness of Heriot fractured by the rhythm of his self-talk. The phrase “from the ruins of the rocks themselves” in Chinese turns into “从岩石自身的废墟中拔地而起” (“rising abruptly from the ruins of the rocks themselves”), thereby preserving the paradoxical image of uprightness within destruction. The idea of the red cliff remains in its three-level meaning: physical decay, faith destruction, and identification with nature.

In effect, English readers can draw upon their knowledge of culture and literature while Chinese readers can depend on the rhythm and imagery that the translation has created. Eventually, they will both be led to the same point of reception where the old man is the broken cliff and the cliff is the wilderness. In effect, there has been a successful meeting

of authorial intent and reader reception through communication.

## 4. Conclusion

According to Eco-translatology, Huang Yuanshen's Chinese translation of *To the Islands* as *Gui Su* is a performance that involves coordination in three levels. At the linguistic level, there is syntactic domestication, but the poem keeps its metaphors intact, and the wilderness images like "morning as a servant" and "the self of the day time" keep their imaginations despite the recoding in the process of translation. At the syntactic level, it avoids the rigidity of accumulating the Europeanization of structures, and the text of the original does not become ordinary prose in terms of the linguistic feature. At the cultural level, it maintains the Aboriginal islands of the dead and the Christian crosses as two parallel systems. There are connotations of Taoism as far as nature is concerned through "convert" and "just animals." Meanwhile, there is no geographical meaning of "islands" because of the title *Gui Su*. At the communicative dimension, ritualistic short sentences, Chinese reduplicative expressions, and open-ended closure help reconstruct Stow's intention concerning the relinquishment of authority, fragmentation of selfhood, and anticipation of revelation, as well as his vision of cross-cultural reconciliation. In this way, Chinese readers in the 1980s are encouraged to receive the novel primarily as an existential allegory rather than as a travel narrative.

The translator thus achieves dynamic adaptation between the source-language ecology—characterized by the missionary-station environment of northwestern Australia and Stow's Taoist-inflected Christian narrative—and the target-language ecology, represented by the Chinese foreign-

literature field of the 1980s and Huang's dual identity as scholar and translator. This demonstrates that literary translation is not merely a process of transferring linguistic codes but a form of cross-ecological transplantation. Only when linguistic form, cultural difference, and communicative intention can simultaneously survive in the translated text can the original "islands" continue to emerge in another language. In this sense, Huang Yuanshen's choice of the two Chinese characters *Gui Su* performs a decisive ecological intervention: before the island itself can emerge in Chinese, the translator first provides it with a place to land.

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