

Gary Snyder Studies in Korea

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Studies on Gary Snyder in Korea have been developed along with the public's recognition of the danger of the environmental contamination all over the world throughout the late 20th century. During the late 1980s, people's yearning for the freedom and democracy was achieved to a certain extent, but the economic policy for the ceaseless development and progress has brought about an unprecedented environmental degradation. Wonil Kim's "Meditation on a Snipe" and Sehui Cho's *A Dwarf Launches a Small Ball* graphically portray the dismal landscape of the aftermath of rapid industrialization. The leakage of the phenol (carbolic acid) into the Nakdong river in 1991 showed clearly how terrible and deadly can be the ecological catastrophe, providing a turning point in the history of Korean environmental movement. The general public has finally come to recognize that the progressionists' idea of the supremacy of the economic growth was at the expense of nature which is indispensable to our survival. In the field of politics and social movement, the push for freedom and democracy changed into the environmental movement. Accordingly, the dispute over the political ideology was replaced by the emerging ecological discourse.

Snyder was first introduced to Korea in 1970s by English literature scholars such as Younggul Lee and Sungkyu Cho. But it was in 1990s that the interest in the ecological problem was rapidly increasing in all areas of society that he was seriously introduced and studied. Professor Lee published "Gary Snyder and James Dickey" in *Poetic Literature* in 1973, in which he noted three poems of Snyder, "After Work," "Marin-An" and "A Berry Feast." In "The End of the Beat Movement, Environmental Concern—With Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder in Mind," Cho investigates the ecological turn of the Beat Movement by studying the three writers. Won-Chung Kim's "Making Love with Nature: Gary Snyder's Ecological Vision," which was published in 1995 in the *Journal for English Language and Literature*, can be regarded as the first paper studying Snyder from the ecological perspective. As the title of the article suggests, Kim defines Snyder as an ecological poet and investigates his ecological vision through a close reading of *Myths and Texts*. By showing how the ecological approach can be applied to the analysis of literary works, this paper facilitates the study of Korean as well as American ecopoets.

According to the database of the Research Information Service System (RISS) in Korea Education & Research Service (KERIS), about 35 papers on Snyder were published to date. Most of them are published in scholarly journals, but some are published in the literary journals, indicating that Snyder is popular not only among scholars but also among poets and general readers in Korea. Besides these, two Ph.D. dissertations and 10 M.A. theses were written. Two books of his selected poems and two books of his prose were also translated into Korean. In 1999, Ogku Kang, translator and poet, selected 76 poems from Snyder's *No Nature* and translated them into Korean. Professor Kangmok Seo translated 69 poems

of Snyder and published them under the title of *This Present Moment* in 2005. Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* and *A Place in Space* were translated by Prof. Sangwha Lee and published in 2000 and 2005 respectively. Such an astounding amount of publication on Snyder within no more than 10 years is really remarkable to say the least. The fact becomes more evident when compared with Wendell Berry, another famous eco-poet. Even though Berry was introduced several times in *Green Criticism*, one of the most famous environmental magazines, and one of his novels and three books of prose were translated, the scholars in Korea show little interest in him that only one paper was published in a scholarly journal. In short, Gary Snyder has become a synonym for eco-poet in Korea and taken his place among the most famous environmental writers along with H.D. Thoreau.

Chang-Heoun Ryu discusses the characteristics of Snyder's Zen poems in his Ph.D. dissertation, "Gary Snyder's Poetic World: A Study of Zen Poetry" (1996, Keimyung University). He classifies Zen poetry into two groups, Zen-idea poetry which advocates directly Zenic ideas and Zen-taste poetry which expresses indirectly Zenic ideas, and then argues that Snyder writes both kinds of Zen poetry. In his 2003 Ph.D. dissertation, "Snyder's Nature Poetry: For the Ecological Inhabitation" (Korea University), Oak-Suk Yang studies the overall aspects of Snyder as an ecological poet. What is most remarkable in the thesis is his endeavor to understand Snyder from the perspective of bioregionalism. Most of the ten Master theses approach Snyder from the ecological perspective, as the titles such as "Snyder's Nature Poetry," "A Study of Ecological Imagination," "The Harmony between Man and Nature," "The Recovery of Everyday Life," "A Study of Snyder's Eco-poetics" and "An Ideal Community..." suggest.

Much of the papers published in scholarly journals in Korea also investigate Snyder from the ecocritical perspective. But in this paper, just for the convenience of the argument, I would like to divide them into six categories: 1) Studies of Snyder's poems from the perspective of the Oriental thoughts (especially from the Buddhist perspective) 2) Studies of Snyder's nature or ecological poems 3) Studies comparing Snyder with Korean eco-poets 4) Studies comparing Snyder with other American ecowriters 5) Contemporary critical theory-oriented approaches to Snyder 6) Other miscellaneous studies.

Because Snyder pursued graduate study in the Department of East Asian Languages at the University of California, Berkeley and studied Buddhism in Japan for more than 10 years, the influence of Buddhism on his poetry is well-known. Taking cue from this fact, Korean scholars have studied the relationship between Snyder's poetry and Buddhism; one group of scholars investigate the relationship between Zen poems and Snyder, while others study the Buddhist ecological ideas in his poetry. Oak-Suk Yang represents the first group, whose "Gary Snyder's Understanding of Zen Buddhism and Zen Poetry" argues that Snyder uses Zen Buddhism as a kind of tool with which to criticize the Western culture, especially the materialistic civilization which has brought about the current environmental crisis. Unlike Changhyeon Ryu, he insists that Snyder's Zen poetry is closer to Zen-taste poetry rather than Zen-idea poetry, pursuing the ultimate oneness with nature through direct contact with nature. Won-Chung Kim's

“Making Love with Nature: Gary Snyder’s Ecological Vision” and Hae-Seong Jung’s “Interdependent Life and Zen Buddhism in Gary Snyder’s Poetry” are two most prominent papers in the second group. Kim argues that the Buddhist idea of the interconnectedness and interpenetration of all things as figured in the Indra’s net informs Snyder vision, in which he tries to heal the ailing earth in the compassion of the Bodhisattva. Reading Snyder’s *The Back Country* and *Myths and Texts*, Jung insists that Snyder gets into the inside of the things and sees the things from the inside, and thereby reaches a state of “no two-ness” (不二) in which the dichotomy of man and nature, subject and object holds ground no longer.

In the second category of studying Snyder’s nature or ecological poems, I would like to mention Byong Hyon Choi’s “The Nature Poetry and Ecocriticism of Gary Snyder,” Eunseong Kim’s “Reading Gary Snyder’s Early Works: From Dualistic Boundary to New Paradigm,” Oak-Suk Yang’s “Snyder’s Poems and Bioregionalism” and Won-Chung Kim’s “Making Love with Nature: Gary Snyder’s Ecological Vision.” By a close analysis of *Myths and Texts*, Won-Chung Kim argues that at the heart of Snyder’s ecological vision lie the teachings of Buddhism and Taoism, and the wisdom of the Native Americans, and that they have provided him with a way to liberate us from the anthropocentrism and to regard all things as fellow citizen of the precious living community. Snyder’s ecological vision, Kim continues, culminates in an ecological eros in which man triumphs over his opposition with nature and makes love with nature. In a similar vein, Eunseong Kim defines Snyder as a deep ecologist, and insists that Snyder endeavors to get over the dichotomy of man and nature and to put the biocentric egalitarianism into practice by recovering the original mind through revolutionizing our mind.

Choi’s article is a general account of Snyder’s ecological poetics, which emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of all things, based on the idea that man and nature are equal beings sharing the planet. His argument that Snyder presents bioregionalism as a model through which we can get over the anthropocentrism and secure balance between nature and human society is worth listening. Yang explicates how the poems in *Turtle Island* and *Axe Handles* embody Snyder’s poetics of bioregionalism, and notes its political implication to save the region against the encroaching exploitation of the industrial society. Besides these, Jakwang Gu’s “A Study of Gary Snyder’s Proposals for an Ecological Life” deals with the problem of the tension and conflict between man and animal. Gu argues that Snyder thinks we should neither idealize nor abase animals but put some distance between us and them, accepting them as fellow members of the life community who have their own specific way and condition of life.” Won-Chul Shin’s “*Mountains and Rivers Without End* of Gary Snyder—Epic of Pilgrimage” is the only paper yet written about the poem. In the paper, Shin argues that the poem is not merely about wanderings, but an epic portraying Snyder’s spiritual pilgrimage.

In the third category of comparing Snyder with Korean poets, three papers are worth mentioning. In “Ecoconsciousness in the Indigenous Cultures Revisited by Chiha Kim and Gary Snyder,” Yong-ki Kang notes that both poets develop ecoconsciousness based on their own indigenous culture. Snyder finds an alternative ecological vision in the culture of Native Americans and Buddhism, while Kim in the life

philosophy of *Donghak*, a traditional thought of Korea. Young-hee Chang's "A Comparative Study of Ecoconsciousness in the Korean and American Ecopoetry with a Special Emphasis on Gary Snyder and Chiha Kim" is somewhat unique in that it is written by a Korean literary scholar. In the paper, Chang argues that both poets criticize sharply the destruction of life and inhumanity of modern civilization and try to build a new life community with an insight that man and nature are one and the same being in a deep level. In "Reading Gary Snyder and Jong Hyonjong from the Ecological Vision," Sung-Chang Park, another Korean literature specialist, insists that both poets believe that ecological problems can be solved only when people reestablish their relationship with nature. Their thoughts are, he continues, in line with the ecology of the mind, which asks for the revolution of human mind and attitude.

While the papers mentioned above are mainly studies of certain themes, Young-ki Kang's "The Politics of Deconstruction in Snyder's 'Ripples on the Surface'" and Dong-Oh Choi's "The Ecological Reciprocity Between Self and Other: A Meeting Ground of Bakhtin and Snyder" show a more advanced discussion. Comparing Snyder's ecopoetics with Derrida's deconstruction, Kang argues that Snyder, using the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness as a tool, attempts to subvert and reconstruct the anti-ecological culture at the same time. He also demonstrates, by closely analyzing "The Ripples on the Surface," how Snyder's poems pass over the dichotomy of man and nature and develop into dialogic discourse for democratic mutual living. Similarly, Choi also investigates the ecological harmonious relationship between man and nature by applying Bakhtin's notion of reciprocity between self and other in reading Snyder's poems. If Bakhtin's reciprocity deconstructs the dichotomy of the Western metaphysics and stresses humility for a mutual living of self and other, Snyder's ecopoetics, Choi argues, is also based on the green politics which demythologizes our cultural prejudices and criticizes the power relations of our dichotomist way of thinking. Besides these, Won-Chung Kim investigates the ecological visions of Merwin, Ammons and Snyder from the perspective of Orientalism in "Ecological Literature and Oriental Thoughts: Another Orientalism?." He argues Snyder's ecological vision cultured by the creative dialogue and fusion of horizons between Western ecology and Oriental Buddhism is different from the political Orientalism which is invented to perpetuate the imperial domination.

Hee-Soo Yoon studies Snyder in relation with other American ecopoets. In "A Study of the Relationship between Thoreau and Modern American Ecological Poetry," he argues that Snyder is a poet writing in a tradition of Thoreau along with Levertov, Roethke, Ammons and Merwin. He also insists in "Linguistic Skepticism and Environmentalism: A Study of Modern American Nature Poetry" that Snyder, along with Stevens, Rich, Ammons, shows precautions against the arbitrary abstraction of language and respect for the ontological autonomy of nature. In "Looking for the Eastern Light: An Ecological Movement in Contemporary American Poetry," Won-Chung Kim approaches Jeffers, Ginsberg and Snyder from the perspective of Taoism and Buddhism respectively. He also discusses Berry, Ammons and Snyder as representing the Christian, scientific, and Oriental thoughts-oriented ecological tendency in

the United States respectively in “From the Mutual Annihilation of Pride to the Mutual Living of Humility.”

Besides these, Eunseong Kim’s “Gary Snyder as a Translator and Poet in *Cold Mountain*” which insists *Cold Mountain* is not a mere translation but another creative work of Snyder, and Mi-ae Park’s “Gary Snyder’s Imaginative Landscape” which analyzes the characteristics of Snyder’s imagination from the perspective of Bachelard’s poetics of reverie are worth mentioning.

In sum, Snyder studies in Korea for the last ten years are truly remarkable as far as the amount of the published material is concerned, as this trend seems to continue. But to raise the level of scholarship, I think, several factors should be considered. 1) Because studies on Snyder have focused predominantly on his role as an ecological poet so far, much broader multi-dimensional approaches are needed. Snyder in the tradition of American poetry, the influence of Pound, Williams, Jeffers, Snyder’s experiment with language, similarities or differences with other ecopoets are some promising topics. 2) In the case of investigating Snyder’s relationship with Buddhism or Taoism, one should stop simply applying some key concepts like nothingness (*sunyata*), dependant causation, interconnectedness, flow, Tao, wu-wei to analyzing his poems. Direct and in-depth study of the basic texts of Buddhism and Taoism and eco-Buddhism and eco-Taoism is needed. 3) Because Oriental philosophy and Native American thoughts constitute main part of Snyder’s ecological vision, multi-cultural approach is critical. The problem of Orientalism and appropriation of Oriental thoughts, localization, re-import of the ecologically reinterpreted Buddhism and Taoism in the West should be investigated. 4) Future critical analysis should include neglected works such as *The Back Country*, *Regarding Wave*, and *Mountains and Rivers Without End* since only *Turtle Island* and *Myths and Texts* have been studied extensively. The method of critical approaches should be widened and diversified to include methods other than deep ecology, such as ecofeminism, phenomenology, multiculturalism, etc. When these tasks are successively tackled, more in-depth study of Snyder will blossom in Korea, and it will also suggest more productive ways to study other Korean ecopoets as well.

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