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Deep in the Mountain Wilderness：the Non-Self Ecopoetics In Kenneth Rexroth's Translation of *鹿柴*

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ABSTRACT: *Green Buddhism explores the Buddhist perception of the human-nature relationship, reflecting on Buddhist thought through an ecological lens. A similar approach is evident in literary academia, where ecocriticism draws on Buddhist teachings and philosophies to analyze literary writings from such an integrated and transdisciplinary perspective. In light of this, this paper delves into Buddhist ecopoetics in "Deep in the Mountain Wilderness", a renowned ancient Chinese Ch'an(Zen) poem 鹿柴 translated by Kenneth Rexroth. Through close reading of this poem, a "non-self" experience was perceived both in Chinese mountains and American wilderness, reshaping our understanding about the human-nature integration.*

KEYWORDS: *Kenneth Rexroth, ecopoetics, non-self, Ch'an Buddhism, translation of classical Chinese poetry*

Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982), a prolific American poet widely recognized as "Father of the Beats," was also acknowledged as a "mountain-climbing naturalist committed to the protection of the planet long before ecology became a popular concern" (Gibson1972: 1). Furthermore, he was identified as one of "eco-poets of the California landscape" (Hinton 2017: 135). Despite previous studies delving into the ecopoetics in his works, only a few have recognized the profound connection between Rexroth's ecopoetics and the influence derived from *Ch'an* Buddhism and classical Chinese poetry. As highlighted by David Hinton (2017: 14), modern American avant-garde poetry, with one of its ecopoetic roots in ancient China, can be seen as an extension of the "mountains-and-rivers" (*山水*) tradition of classical Chinese poetry. The "non-self" ecopoetics in Rexroth's work, particularly in the poem "Deep in the Mountain Wilderness", serves as a noteworthy example of this connection and extension.

"Deep in the Mountain Wilderness" is Rexroth's translation of a renowned ancient Chinese *Ch'an*(Zen) poem *鹿柴* by Wang Wei. However, due to Rexroth's creative rewriting, critics often regard this translationas "the poem Wang might have written had he been born a 20th century American" (Weinberger & Paz 1987: 23). In this sense, it's not only the translation of a classical Chinese poem, but also a modern American poet's poem.

鹿柴

—— 王维

空山不见人，
但闻人语响。
返景入深林，

复照青苔上。

Deep in the Mountain Wilderness

— Wang Wei

Deep in the mountain wilderness
Where nobody ever comes
Only once in a great while
Something like the sound of a far off voice.
The low rays of the sun
Slip through the **dark forest,**
And gleam again on the **shadowy moss. (**Rexroth 1970: 58)

鹿柴, this classical Chinese poem is one of the best poems in the Tang Dynasty, written by *Wang Wei* (701-761).Known as "poet Buddha," Wang Wei was a first-class poet in that age of masters, He is famous for *Ch'an* Buddhist thoughts, where the concept of "non-self"or "selfless" derives. Rexroth translated *鹿寨* and collected it in his translation volume *Love and the Turning Year: One Hundred More Poems from Chinese* (1970) at a time when ecologism and environmental movements became a fashion. Thus it's not surprising to see this poem as a good case of the non-self ecopoetics.

At first sight, this poem is merely a simple description of the natural landscape — a lonely mountain, a deep forest, a setting sun illuminating a patch of moss — a description that seems too simple and even bland. Why could this poem become one of the first-class poems in the history of classical Chinese poetry? Hinton (2017: 76) thinks highly of this simplicity, believing the seemingly flat words are typically descriptions of enlightenment moments in which one has become wholly landscape or even Cosmos. In contrast to the traditional western poetics, which was "characterized by a highly subjective language of sentiment, abstraction, decorative metaphor, and rhetorical embellishment" (Hinton 2017: 25), the simplicity is a high-level aesthetic principle in classical Chinese poetics: it seeks the representation of nature as it is, the representation of nature without human manipulation or distortion. In other words, the poet attempts to relinquish the arrogant "self" in poetry—the abstract cerebral "ego" separate from and stop lording over nature, similar to the "aesthetics of relinquishment" put by Lawrence Buell (1995: 143) on ecological writing. Here a non-self ecopoetics happens.

It is noticeable that Rexroth rewrites the poem's title *鹿柴* (literal meaning: Deer Grove) into "Deep in the **Mountain Wilderness**," which is the same translation of the first sentence ***空山***不见人(literal meaning: no one can be seen in the empty mountain). The title of the poem, *鹿柴*,is a place-name, something like **Deer Grove**, and it probably alludes to the Deer Park in Sarnath, where the Gautama Buddha preached his first sermon (Weinberger & Paz 1987: 7). In Weinberger and Paz's view, Rexroth ignores what he presumably dislikes, or feels cannot be translated, in the original, so he eliminates the title (Weinberger&Paz 1987: 20). However, according to Collins Dictionary, "wilderness" derives from the old English "wildēornes"/"wild dēor", which means "wild deer" (Sinclair 2000: 1603). Therefore, "Mountain Wilderness" is etymologically related to **"**Deer Grove." This "wilderness" sets Rexroth's tone for the non-self ecopoetics in this poem.

In *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* by Weinberger and Paz, Rexroth is the only translator to highlight "wilderness" in a total of 19 translations of this poem. Other translations of the first sentence remain faithful to the original, such as James Liu's version – On the **empty mountains** no one can be seen (Weinberger & Paz 1987: 20), and Burton Watson's –**Empty hills**, no one in sight (Weinberger & Paz 1987: 24). The phrase *空山*, the empty mountain, is a poetic image frequently used by Wang Wei. Being "empty" are not only physical mountains, but also the state of mind. Emptiness is a core concept in *Ch'an* Buddhism. It does not refer to a vacuum, meaninglessness or a denial of existence, but tothe conditioned nature of all phenomena. Fundamentally, there is no self; all things are interrelated and connected, empty of isolated identity (Irons 2008: 161). Thus "emptiness" alludes to a state of non-self. However, Rexroth changes the philosophical "empty mountain" into the empirical "mountain wilderness" (Weinberger & Paz 1987: 23), turning it into his own poem of wilds. This change is related to Rexroth's identity as "an authority in the wilds, on life in the woods and

mountains, at camp or climbing" (Hamalian 1991: 84). Rexroth's experience of the wilds is part of his ecosophy, providing him with peace, meditation, and a connection to nature (Hamalian 1991: 185). As Gary Snyder (1990: 94) puts it, *sacred* refers to that which helps take us (not only human beings) out of our little selves into the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe[1]. To Rexroth, the wilderness experience is a form of pilgrimage and spiritual practice. Through intimate contact with the wilderness, he rediscovers his authentic self in "the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe", like an ancient Chinese poet-hermit. Rexroth rebuilds the self through wilderness he created in the translation of this poem, leading to the question of why there is a non-self ecopoetics. It could be argued that Rexroth's sense of no-self helps him reconstruct the self. This seemingly paradox will bring ecopoetics into discussion. In the context of ecosophy and ecopoetics, the concept of the "real self" is not characterized by a dominating ego that subjugates nature, but rather as an integrated self, an ecological self, a self defined by nature and blending with nature. Simply put in an ecopoetic framework, it is through the dissipation of the anthropocentric self and a deep connection with nature that the real self appears.

A typical case for Rexroth's use of this non-self ecopoetics lies in his dealing with "I". Contrary to most translations in *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, the person pronouns rarely appear in Chinese poems, which is an embodiment of non-self. Both W. J. B. Fletcher and Witter Bynner have the first person singular when translating the second sentence— "But whence is the echo of voices **I hear**?" "And yet **I think I hear** a voice" in their translations, while not in Rexroth's version — "Only once in a great while, something like the sound of a far off voice." Is the sound of human beings? It is not clear. What we are sure is that the sudden and mystic sound makes the mountain even more secluded, presenting a world without human ego's projection and intervention. Only nature speaks and acts.

Weinberger and Paz consider Rexroth's version to be "the closest to the spirit, if not the letter, of the original" (Weinberger & Paz 1987: 23). Chung Ling also speaks highly of Rexroth's translation, emphasizing his efforts to "reduce subjective communication between the poet and nature"(Chung 1985: 150). Essentially, Rexroth's translation shows a tendency to adopt the classical Chinese poetics of "viewing things as things view themselves"(*以物观物*). This aligns closely with Wang Wei's style. William Yip (1978: 214) draws a comparison between Wang Wei's aesthetic consciousness of landscape and that of Wordsworth: to Wordsworth, the concreteness of the objects gives way to abstraction through the poet's analytical intervention, whereas, there is little subjective emotion or intellectuality to disturb the inner growth and change of the objects in front of Wang Wei. It's a sense of non-self that distinguishes Wang Wei poetry from others.

The non-self ecopoetics has its connection with *Ch'an* Buddhist wisdom. The poetic state of non-self origins from the *Ch'an* Buddhist thought *anatta*. This state is considered as an achieved perception in which nature is affirmed in its original existence as sufficient, occupying us directly without ego's projection or conceptual distortion, a perception of self-emptiness as mentioned above. When we quit conquering things around us with our mind, put down self-ego and return the original nature to nature, the prime poetic state then open to us. That's the "aha moment" a poet can get in writing a poem, or the *satori* one with the Buddhist heart can attain. "Poet Buddha" *Wang Wei* often embeds his poems with Buddhist thought. In fact, the whole poem of *鹿柴* alludes to a process of Buddhist enlightenment. The first two sentences connect the empty heart in *Ch'an* Buddhist meditation to the empty mountain. Then in the last two sentences, the rays of sunset return to the deep forest and shine the moss again. The moss gets illuminated by the sunset and shadow exposes to the light, meanwhile, the heart exposes to the Buddhist enlightenment — That's a moment when the ego is left aside and self is merging into the other. Weinberger and Paz (1987: 7) mentioned that *景*, the 2nd character in the 3rd line of the Chinese poem, has contradictory readings: either*jing* (brightness) or *ying* (shadow). Among a multitude of translations, Rexroth's version is the only one to present a clear contrast of darkness and light: "dark forest" and "shadowy moss" along with "rays of the sun" put the tone of the light into two opposites. It actually exemplifies the Buddhist wisdom of non-dualism: there exists no distinct boundary between light and shadow, self and other, human and nature; all these opposing forces blend into a vast and interconnected existence, forming a unified Cosmos.

According to Buddhist wisdom of non-dualism, the concept of non-self does not imply a dichotomy between humans and nature, nor does it negate the presence of humans. Instead, it transcends the hierarchical and dualistic logic and encourages an integration of humans and nature. Ego being put down, mind blends with the environment around and becomes a part of nature. Consequently, nature exists both inside and outside of the mind — the mind is everywhere, nature is everywhere. By shifting from a subject/object epistemology to a human-nonhuman onto-epistemology, it exemplifies the non-dualistic ecopoetics.

To better understand such a non-self ecopoetics Rexroth highlights, we can turn to a famous *kung-an* (köan) in the *Ch'an* Buddhist *Transmission of the Lamp*:

> Thirty years ago before I was initiated into *Ch'an*, I saw mountains as mountains, rivers rivers. Later when I got an entrance into knowledge, I saw mountains not as mountains, rivers not as rivers. Now that I have achieved understanding of the substance, mountains are still mountains, rivers.[2]

That is the process of attaining enlightenment in *Ch'an* meditation. It can also be interpreted as representing three stages of our perception of reality. Wai-lim Yip (1978: 212) uses the three stages to discuss the aesthetic consciousness of landscape in nature poetry: The first stage corresponds to a naive mode of comprehending reality, where there is no involvement of epistemological activity in consciousness. The aesthetic response is a direct interaction with nature, devoid of conscious intellectual language. This is akin to poems by children or primitive individuals that aim to identify objects in nature in their indigenous status. The second stage takes us away from the fresh and immediate appeal of the landscape to seek in the world of ideas for relationships and meanings. The third stage represents an attained perception wherein we affirm the landscape in its original existence as independent and self-sufficient. The third stage, also the highest artistic state of nature poetry in classical Chinese poems, is to see something such in and by itself, to accept it as it is, self-so-complete. Being non-self ecopoetic lies in the third stage —by eliminating the controlling individual mind of the poet, nature shows itself and the experience becomes immediate to the reader. It is nature who speaks, rather than human beings.

The non-self ecopoetics in classical Chinese poetry, especially "mountains-and-rivers" (landscape) poetry, aims to answer the questions on the adequacy of nature: Can nature in its mere physical existence express itself without the projection of the poet's ideas or emotions? Can nature in its naive forms occupy us directly without involving the world of concepts? The discussion is similar to the phenomenological discussion of *Being* by philosophers like Heidegger. The non-self poet aims to release the objects in *Phenomenon* from their seemingly irrelevance and bring forth their original freshness and thingness—return to their first innocence, thus, making them relevant as *self-so-complete* objects in their existence (Yip1978: 215). The poet gazes at natural objects in such a way as to allow them to leap out directly and spontaneously to us, relinquishes his subjectivity as a dominant human and merges himself with nature before the act of writing the poem. In this way, he then gives up his ego and attains the poetic state of "harmony between human and nature"(*天人合一*). It is a key term in traditional Chinese philosophy, also an important eco-wisdom which may provide ruminations for people in Anthropocene. Originating from traditional Chinese philosophy, the non-self ecopoetics Rexroth intentionally highlights in translation, affirms nature as it is.

Back to the scenery in *鹿寨*, written by Wang Wei and rewritten by Rexroth: wilderness, mountain, sun rays, moss, invisible human beings… They collectively form a single existence-issue, and the existence-issue, as highlighted by Hinton (2016: 9), is our most fundamental self. By poetic dwelling in nature as Rexroth and Wang Wei did, the boundary between the empty awareness and the expansive wilderness dissipates. Consequently, there's no distinction between inside and outside, no *I* separate from everything else (Hinton 2016: 9). Through the analysis of "Deep in the Mountain Wilderness", a non-self experience was perceived in Chinese "mountains and rivers", and also in American "wilderness", reshaping our understanding about the human-nature relationship. Furthermore, we recognize one of the origins of Rexroth's ecopoetics— it derived from Chinese Ch'an Buddhist culture and classical Chinese poetry.

NOTES

1. A Buddhist graphic symbol of the universe.

2. This famous *kung-an* (koan) has been quoted frequently in books on *Ch'an*(Zen) Buddhism.

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