

The “Community of Love” and Kenneth Rexroth’s Eco-Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry

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ABSTRACT: Due to his identity as both an eco-poet and a translator of classical Chinese poetry, Kenneth Rexroth’s translation bears the imprints of his ecological views, thereby manifesting as a form of eco-translation. This paper examines Rexroth’s ecosophy of the “community of love” and explores the influence of this ecosophy on his translation practice. The analysis reveals that the value of the “community of love” is foregrounded and rendered explicit through his translation.

KEYWORDS: Kenneth Rexroth, community, eco-translation, classical Chinese poetry, human-nature relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982), despite his reputation as the “Godfather of the Beats” or the “Chief of the San Francisco Renaissance,” was not only an accomplished American poet but also a translator who produced extensive English translations of classical Chinese poems. His four translated collections of classical Chinese poetry include: *One Hundred Chinese Poems* (1956), *Love and the Turning Year: One Hundred More Poems from Chinese* (1970), *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China* (1972), and *Li Ch’ing-chao, Complete Poems* (1979). As he is also identified as a “mountain-climbing naturalist committed to the protection of the planet long before ecology became a popular concern” (Morgan 1972: 1) and one of the “eco-poets of the California landscape” (Hinton 2017: 135), Rexroth’s translation bears the imprints of his ecological views and ecosophy (eco-philosophy). Consequently, his translation practice may be regarded as a form of “eco-translation,” a concept defined by Michael Cronin as encompassing “all forms of translation thinking and practice that knowingly engage with the challenges of human-induced environmental change” (Cronin 2016: 2). This paper explores Rexroth’s ecosophy of the “community of love” and investigates the influence of this ecosophy on his translation.

II. THE COMMUNITY OF LOVE

The concept of the “community of love” is one of the main tenets of Rexroth’s eco-poetics. The core meaning of this term can be interpreted as ecological holism, which emphasizes the interdependence of all things and the overall interests of the ecosystem. It is similar to Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, which “extends the boundaries of the community from the human world to include soils, water, animals and the land” (Clark 2011: 78). The land ethic gives the concept of “community” an important position in ecocriticism. When David Robertson asked Rexroth about his use of both Eastern and Western views on the human-nature relationship, he replied: “The important thing is the community of love, and the community of love is all the world.” (Robertson 1975, 25) Robertson (25) maintains that Rexroth has kept the western notion of love as the supremely important element in the relationship between self and other, but has expanded the category of lover to include all things. This means,

as Robertson mentions, “that he can relate as directly to trees and mountains and rivers as he can to a woman” (25).

Instead of being in a community with other people, Rexroth joined the community of nature, in company with his “friends” in nature. Rexroth’s concept “community of love” aligns with the “community of shared life”, having ecological implications. As early as the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2013, Chinese Chairman XI Jinping pointed out that we should realize that the country’s mountains, rivers, forests, land, and lakes form a community of shared life. The concept of this community, which condenses the overall and individual dialectical relationship, relies on interdependence among human beings and nature. It places a responsibility on us to take the earth as a community of shared life, and do our utmost to protect the environment and conserve the ecosystem. Human beings and other beings are closely linked with each other in this community, and any short-sighted development at the cost of the environment will eventually make us pay a heavy price. In terms of the community of love, the community is in accordance with ecological holism, while love is the humility to live in this world, which resolves the dualistic conflicts between humans and nature, men and women, self and the other.

The search for connection with nature is lifelong attitude of Rexroth. As Rexroth stated in his autobiography:

My poetry and philosophy of life became what it’s now fashionable to call ecological. I came to think of myself as a microcosm in a macrocosm, related to chipmunks and bears and pine trees and stars and nebulae and rocks and fossils, as part of an infinitely interrelated complex of being. (Rexroth 1991: 376-77)

Rexroth thinks of himself as a microcosm in a macrocosm, emphasizing his relationship to animals and plants in nature. This lays a foundation for his pursuit of the construction of the “community of love.” Rexroth found in ancient Chinese poets love and the humility to live in the community of shared life with nature. He contended that from Iliad and Odyssey, such Western classics, “the universe and its parts, the great forces of Nature, fire, sun, sky and storm, earth and procreation, viewed as persons are frivolous and dangerous, from the point of view of men often malicious, and always unpredictable” (Rexroth 1959: 18). As for the Chinese, however, “they make no moral judgment of the universe. They have no gods to fight against. Man and his virtues are a part of the universe, like falling water and standing stone and drifting mist”(18). The world he saw in classical Chinese poetry is basically the true picture of the Chinese universe, in which Nature works by “doing nothing” instead of passing laws, in which the universe moves a great web of interrelatedness of which man and his imperatives are only part (Rexroth 1961: 86). The human-nature harmony and interdependence of all things in classical Chinese poetry present an ecological utopia that Rexroth yearned for—the community of love. Such a value also has important influence on his translation of classical Chinese poetry, where he highlights the “community of love” and makes the translation through explicitation.

III. EXPLICITATION IN REXROTH’S TRANSLATION

Here are some examples about how Rexroth make an explicitation of the ecospophy about the “community of love” in his translations of classical Chinese poetry.

“In the Mountains as Autumn Begins” (“早秋山居”) presents a glimpse of mountain life and a self-contained state of mind. The harmony between man and nature is felt in “果落见猿过，叶干闻鹿行” (Fruits fall and gibbons pass; leaves become dry and deer walk through). The original Chinese sentence presents many images but what is the relationship among these things? What is the connection between gibbons and fruit, deer and leaves? The whole picture seems fragmented. Rexroth compensated for this fragmentation and seeming unrelatedness in his translation and rewrote it as:

I watch the gibbons **gather** fallen fruit.
All night **I hear** the deer **stamping**
In the dry leaves. (Rexroth 1970: 86)

The connection is obvious through Rexroth’s translation: gibbons come because they gather fruit for food, deer stamp in the dry leaves so that I could hear. The original sentence does not have the subject “I”. The abolition of the first-person subject in poetry writing is an aesthetic tradition in classical Chinese poetics—without the ego’s interjection, the poetic cosmos can run naturally. Even though Rexroth introduces the subject “I” in his translation, “I” only watch and hear, without the intervention of the ego. I watch and hear but I do not control or dominate. The agency presented in the sentence is still gibbons and deer. The supplementary “gather” and “stamp” in Rexroth’s translation connect every being of the poem explicitly. In this way, Rexroth expanded the content, compensating and clarifying the relationship which was originally indirect, in a bid to construct such a harmonious scene and highlight correlations within nature. The ecological wish for the “community of love” can explain why he made the correlations explicit in his translation and why he always emphasized the connection among every being in nature.

Generally, human-nature harmony, ecophilia, and meditation in the midst of nature are an implicit state in classical Chinese poetry; in other words, the relationship and connection are never made explicit. The indirectness and seeming lack of this connection in the poetics leave room for readers to imagine and feel, which makes the artistic conception a roundabout one. Compared with that, Rexroth’s translation highlights the relationship, turning the implicit into the explicit. He often used explicitly-related words such as “companion” and “friendship” in many of his translations.

This can be shown for example in Rexroth’s translation of one sentence “惟有楼前流水，应念我、终日凝眸” in a poem by Li Ch’ing-chao. It says “only the river in front of my building cares about me, watching me gaze into my husband’s direction in the distance all day long.” That is, the river, personalized with emotion, has become a caring friend. Rexroth, however, made explicit the relationship of the poetess and the river— “the jade green river that is **the only companion** of my endless days” (Rexroth 1970, 96). The word “companion” added by Rexroth in his translation emphasizes the equality among different species, which is the first step to constructing the community of love. That is, recognizing companionship instead of a hierarchical relationship paves the way for constructing the ecological utopia Rexroth wished for all his life. In this sense, the translation is an embodiment of not only the distinctions in East-West aesthetics but also Rexroth’s ecopoetics.

This embodiment can also be seen in his translation of “虞美人” by Su Tung P’o.

Original Sentences	Literal Translation	Rexroth’s Translation
持杯摇劝天边月。 愿月圆无缺 持杯复更劝花枝。 且愿花枝长在、 莫 离 披 。 持杯月下花前醉。 休问荣枯事。 此欢能有几人知。 对酒逢花不饮、 待何时。	I raise my cup and invite the moon, with a toast to the forever completeness of the moon. I raise my cup and invite the branches, with a toast to the forever blooming of flowers. I raise my cup and get drunk in face of flowers and under the moon. Don’t talk about flourishing or withering. Not many people understand the happiness of this moment. So if you don’t drink at this moment with moon and flowers, When else would you wait to enjoy?	I raise my cup and invite The moon to come down from the Sky. I hope she will accept Me. I raise my cup and ask The branches, heavy with flowers, To drink with me. I wish them Long life and promise never To pick them. In company With the moon and the flowers, I get drunk, and none of us Ever worries about good Or bad. How many people Can comprehend our joy? Have wine and moon and flowers. Who else do I want for drinking companions? (Rexroth 1956: 95)

The translation is generally in accordance with the spirit of the original text, but several parts were obviously rewritten. The poet raised his cup, giving a toast to the moon and the flowering branches. He hoped that the moon would be forever full and flowers would never fall. Rexroth personalized the flowers and the moon,

inviting them to drink with him. To the flowers, he promised never to pick nor ruin them. As for the moon, he used “she” as the pronoun, hoping the moon would accept him. Here the anthropomorphism makes the moon a girl the poet admires. Through Rexroth’s translation, the moon and flowers are given equal status with the poet, the human. The subjectivity of human beings then is turned into inter-subjectivity among the moon, flowers, and man, which can be seen more clearly in the transformation of the title. The original title is a name to the tune of *ci* poetry— “The Beautiful Lady Yu”; Rexroth, however, replaced the *ci* title with “Moon, Flower, Man.” Rexroth juxtaposed in the title of his translation the three, which equally constitute his dreamt-of “community of love.” Among them there is equality instead of hierarchy, inter-subjectivity rather than subject-object dualism. The community of love is a harmonious ecological state, or rather, an ecopoetic state where the equal communion of all beings in nature is emphasized. “In company with” “what else do I want for drinking companion?” in the translated version are not from the original. Through Rexroth’s adding and rewriting, the moon and flowers are befriended by the poet and the accompanying relationship is highlighted. The equal juxtaposition carries with a sense of anti-anthropocentrism. From an ecocritical point of view, the three constitute a community of drinking, or a “community of love,” which is, in essence, an ecopoetic utopia.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Kenneth Rexroth’s ecosophy of the “community of love” and its influence on his translation of classical Chinese poetry. As both an eco-poet and a translator, Rexroth did not merely render classical Chinese poems linguistically; he recontextualized them through an ecological lens. The analysis demonstrates that Rexroth’s translation practice consistently foregrounds and explicates the value of the “community of love”—an ecological holism that emphasizes interdependence and equality between human beings and nature.

By introducing explicit connections, adding subjects such as “I” as a non-dominant observer, and incorporating relational terms like “companion” and “friendship,” Rexroth transforms the implicit harmony of the original Chinese poems into an explicitly articulated ecological vision. While classical Chinese poetics often achieves human-nature unity through indirection and the absence of an ego, Rexroth’s translations make such relationships overt, thereby constructing what he envisioned as an ecological utopia.

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