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COMMUNION AND DEVIATION

Kenneth Rexroth's Approach to Classical Chinese Poetry

YUNZHONG SHU

Since the turn of this century many American poets have taken an interest in classical Chinese poetry. For several decades it was fashionable in America to translate and imitate Chinese poetry. Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Gary Snyder and, in our case, Kenneth Rexroth, are some notable figures in this movement. As a prolific translator, poet and essayist, Kenneth Rexroth not only translated and imitated Chinese poetry conscientiously but also argued strongly for the merit of Chinese literature in his literary criticism. However, this only constitutes part of his significance in contemporary American literature. An acclaimed translator of Chinese poetry, he is also considered an excellent translator of poems from Japanese, Greek, Latin and Spanish. As a poet he had been very active since the forties and was in one way or another connected with the Objectivists, Surrealists, Cubists and the Beat poets. From the fifties on he has been regarded as a mentor by some younger poets. More significantly, as a consolidator and synthesizer of heterogeneous ideas, he is a representative of the bewildering crosscurrents of thought in the twentieth century and reflects most of the major phases of American writing throughout the century. His influence on contemporary American literature in all these aspects has been considerable.

However, for some reason he has been neglected by American English departments and critics for a long time. As a result, few scholars studied his relationship with Chinese literature until quite recently, though he was for a long time regarded as a translator of Chinese poetry who only came after Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell in importance. As Rexroth's reputation rose in recent years, especially after his death in 1982, more and more scholars studied his poetry and addressed themselves to the Oriental influence on his poetry. But even in the Orient, mainly in

Japan where Rexroth made several long visits in his later years, scholars are chiefly interested in how he made a rather noticeable change in his poetic career by assimilating Zen Buddhism and Japanese culture. They seem to have overlooked Rexroth's relation with Chinese literature, which is a very important aspect of Rexroth's whole literary career. As a translator, he published four books of translated Chinese poetry that have attracted a considerable amount of critical attention and exerted a considerable influence on contemporary American poetry translation as well as poetry writing. As a poet, he repeatedly admitted he had saturated himself with Chinese poetry for decades, especially with the poetry of Tu Fu, who, as one of the greatest non-epic poets of the world, had made him "a better man, as a moral agent and as a perceiving organism" [*An Autobiographical Novel* 319]. An inquiry into Rexroth's relation with Chinese literature is undoubtedly worthwhile.

At this point credit must be given to the scholars who have already begun their research into Rexroth's relation with Chinese poetry: people like John Bishop and Ling Chung. This, however, should not prevent us from pointing out their limitations. In their studies most of these scholars praise Rexroth for the clarity and simplicity of his translation, and the corresponding stylistic features in his own poetry. Though John Bishop and, especially, Ling Chung have pointed out that Rexroth sometimes deviates from the original in his translation, their criticisms are textual rather than contextual. They have not studied Rexroth's translation in connection with his central concept of literature, which is an overall guideline for both his translation and his imitation of Chinese poetry. Once we start from this point, we can not only solve many specific problems but also have a better understanding of Rexroth's approach to Chinese poetry. We will realize that Rexroth's deviation from the original poem in both his translation and imitation of Chinese poetry is contextual and cultural rather than textual. More significantly, because of Rexroth's influence in contemporary American literature, study in this line can further lead us to understand how classical Chinese poetry was adapted to the contemporary American literary milieu. Hopefully this will be of some interest not only to the student of East-West literary relations but also to the student of contemporary American

poetry. Both will gain insight into the assimilation of another culture into American society.

Underlying Rexroth's poetry and translation is the central concept of "communion." This concept to Rexroth means a sensual, personal relationship between human beings. Poetry, including translation of poetry, is an expression of embodiment of this communion. In his manifesto for poetry—"Unacknowledged Legislators and 'Art Pour Art'"—he claims that "the actual poetry" is "the living speech of person to person" [BB 16]. "It communicates the most intense experiences of very highly developed sensibilities" [BB 5].

The purpose of this communion is to offset the alienation caused by contemporary society. During his rather turbulent life, especially in his early years, Rexroth was an indefatigable critic of the conformist impulses that dominate the contemporary world. Influenced by an existentialist concept of alienation, he thought that in contemporary society human beings become more like things than persons, and the individual, as a result of his alienation from other human beings as well as from himself, loses himself in the end. Poetry, it seems to him, is a remedy that can deliver people from this plight. This is because

The speech of poetry is from me to you, transfigured by the overcoming of all thingness—reification—in the relationship [BB 12]

The concept of communion is also, or even more, applicable to translation, which Rexroth regards as "an act of sympathy—the identification of another person with oneself, the transference of his utterance to one's own utterance" [Essays 19]. Because of his emphasis on sympathy or communion in translation, sometimes the distinction between Rexroth the poet and Rexroth the translator is blurred. This is the case in his translation of Chinese poetry.

Rexroth's communion is also characterized by its mysticism. Rexroth believes in Jewish mysticism, namely, Kabbalism and Hasidism. In "Holy Kabbalah" he writes:

Kabbalism is the great poem of Judaism, a tree of symbolic jewels showing forth the doctrine of the universe as the vesture of Deity, of the community as the embodiment of Deity, and of love as the acting of God in man [Essays 51].

The immanence of God in all creation emphasizes the importance of every activity of human life. However, the activity most likely to induce states of ecstasy is the human sexual act.

For the Kabbalist the ultimate sacrament is the sexual act, carefully organized and sustained as the most perfect mystic trance [*Essays* 44].

To Rexroth communion culminates in a sexual act. This culmination can be regarded as the convergence of his humanism expressed as the communion of individuals and erotic mysticism. It is through this sexual union that human beings replace the perverse I-It relationship dominating the contemporary world with the healthy I-Thou relationship. Seeing Rexroth's emphasis on erotic communion between man and woman in this light, we not only understand the prominence of love poems in his poetry but also realize these love poems have a political dimension and imply Rexroth's rebellious attitude towards the Establishment. For this phenomenon, a common one in contemporary Western literature, Michel Foucault gives the following explanation:

A person who holds forth in such language (meaning the discourses concerned with sex) places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets the established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. This explains the solemnity with which one speaks of sex nowadays [*The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, p. 6].

As a humanist, Rexroth believes that the response to the great rhythm of life is fundamentally identical for all human beings. Since the *Shi Ching*, the first poetry anthology in China, contains as much erotic poetry as the *Song of Songs*, he asserts that the interpretation of the former casts great light on the understanding of the latter.

Starting from such a fundamentalist point of view, Rexroth finds that Chinese literature, especially Chinese classical poetry, is very much to his taste because it possesses many characteristics which fit into his concept of "communion."

The most important characteristic in Chinese poetry, it seems to him, is its humanness. Talking about Tu Fu, his favorite Chinese poet, he asserts in his essay "Tu Fu: Poems":

Behind the conventions, behind the faults which make him human and kin to all of us, are a wisdom and a humanness as profound as Homer's [*CR* 129].

In another essay, "The Chinese Classic Novel in Translation" he

also describes, among other characteristics, humanity as a chief characteristic of Chinese classic novel.

Another prominent characteristic of Chinese literature that appeals to him is its "sensibility," the capacity to respond emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, morally and physically or, in other words, the capacity to live one's human life to the fullest extent. Undoubtedly this "sensibility" can ramify into various realms of human life. To Rexroth the Sung dynasty in China provides a very good example:

The Sung sensibility was polarized between quiet meditation, a gentle sinking into the indeterminate profundity of an Absolute which was never absolute, and intense, active curiosity about all the manifold of life and things, which led to investigations into the riddles of nature [*Essays* 9].

This ramification of sensibility indicates the breadth of life and literature, a vital characteristic for Rexroth's ideal life and ideal literature. Moreover, his preference for Sung poetry also stems from his idea that the sensibility in the Sung dynasty is similar to that of the contemporary West, as he describes in the introduction to *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*:

The whole spirit of this time in China is very congenial today, especially to the romantic, empirical-mystic and antinomian taste which has prevailed in the arts of the West since 1940 [*OHPC* XIV].

This congeniality in sensibility accounts for the remarkable position he gives, in his translation of Chinese poetry, to Sung poetry, a poetry on which Chinese scholars generally do not put a very high premium. This is especially noticeable in *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*. Except his favorite poet Tu Fu, all the other eight poets are Sung Poets.

Besides the selection of assimilable poets for his translation, Rexroth's emphasis on humanness and sensibility can be clearly seen in his selection of specific poems to be translated from Chinese sources. In this respect his selection of Tu Fu's poems serves as a good example. According to his own introduction to *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* and to Ling Chung's research, the sources that Rexroth consulted include at least four texts: the Chinese text *Jiu Jia Ji Zhu Du Shi* 九家集注杜诗, a fully annotated collection of all Tu Fu's poems published in the second volume of *A Concordance to the Poems of Tu Fu*; William Hung's prose translation of Tu Fu's poems; Florence Ayscough's literal renderings;

Erwin von Zach's German translations; with the addition of another source—Rexroth's discussion with his Chinese friends such as C. H. Kwock—by Ling Chung. Ling Chung has also identified other sources such as the French translations of Hervey de Saint-Denys, Lo Ta Kang and George Margoulies, and the English translations of Robert Payne, but they did not seem as important as those sources listed above. Out of all these sources the ones that Rexroth consulted most frequently were Ayscough's and Hung's English translations as well as the Chinese texts. Rexroth was not very well versed in Chinese, so he most probably depended more on the English translations. Ayscough and, especially, Hung were scholars familiar with Tu Fu's life and in their books they gave translations that reflect various aspects of Tu Fu's poetry as well as his life. However, this variety is noticeably reduced in Rexroth's selected translations of Tu Fu's poems. In most of these translations Tu Fu appears as a serene observer of nature, as in "Clear After Rain," "New Moon," "Overlooking the Desert," "South Wind," "Clear Evening after Rain," "Full Moon," "Dawn Over the Mountains," "Stars and Moon on the River," and "Brimming Water." Sometimes he philosophizes about the separation and contrast between the peaceful, harmonious world of nature and the tumultuous human society, as in "Visiting Ts'an, Abbot of Ta-Yun," "Moon Festival," and "Travelling Northward." In "By the Winding River I" and "By the Winding River II" Tu Fu seems to say that man should overcome all hindrances and try to enjoy life to the fullest degree, but in "Jade Flower Palace" and "Night in the House by the River" he seems to stress the futility of human activities. Though the poet sometimes goes on a drinking spree and behaves wildly to repress his worries and anxieties, as in "Winter Dawn" and "Snow Storm," he is on the whole detached from society and does not concern himself with state affairs. However, in his real life Tu Fu, like many other Chinese poets, was deeply influenced by Confucianism and took the didactic or social function of poetry very seriously. Some of his best known poems are depictions of devastation caused by wars and corrupt government officials in which he tries to call the government's attention to the suffering of the people and, at the same time, give his own political advice to cure the social ills. None of these social poems is translated by Rexroth because they indicate Tu Fu's affiliation with the state and his adherence to the state philosophy—Confucianism. All these aspects of Tu Fu's

poetry are unpalatable to Rexroth the anarchist and the political nonconformist. As a result, Tu Fu appears somewhat like an intellectual who enjoys various aspects of human life without being directly involved with society.

If we say that Rexroth's selection of Tu Fu's poems coordinates his own emphasis on communion with Tu Fu's enjoyment of human life, then this emphasis becomes much more obvious in his selection of poems written by Mei Yao-ch'en, an important Sung poet. Out of thirteen poems selected by Rexroth, six are short elegies in which Mei mourns his dead wife, and they strongly remind the reader of Rexroth's own elegies for his dead wife, Andree Rexroth. Among the remaining seven poems, we find a short elegy for the death of the poet's baby son, a depiction of the poet's happy family life with his children, and a description of the rather timid advances made by a young man to a virgin girl, as well as two vivid descriptions of daily life. All these poems are more or less concerned with "communion." However, they only reflect one aspect of Mei Yao-ch'en's poetry. As a prolific poet, Mei is chiefly noted for his realistic social poetry, which, like Tu Fu's social poetry, is imbued with Confucian doctrine. This can be partly seen in some of his poems translated into French by George Margouliès in *Anthologie Raisonnée de la Littérature Chinoise*. As Rexroth indicates in the introduction to *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, his own translations are mainly based on Margouliès's translations, but out of Margouliès's sixteen translations he only chooses thirteen, leaving out two poems, "Plainte des Paysans" and "La Pauvre Fille de Jou-Fen," in which Mei describes people's suffering and their complaints and shows his compassion as a Confucianist poet and government official.

In the case of *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China*, an anthology of Chinese women poets Rexroth compiled and translated in collaboration with a Chinese woman poet Ling Chung, the concept of "communion" becomes even more prominent because it can be seen not only in the selection of the poems but also in the wording of the translations. In the first place he chooses many little known women poets for this anthology because their poems, mostly love poems, fit into his literary conceptualization. Out of one hundred and fifteen poems in this collection fifty-one poems deal, in one way or another, with the theme of love. Some of the poets are courtesans or prostitutes and they write about love between man and woman rather openly by Chinese standards.

However, with all their audacity, they still appear to Rexroth too reserved in their treatment of love. To intensify the treatment of human love, Rexroth inserts some words for which we cannot find any equivalent in the original texts. The second Tzu Yeh song in this book is a typical example:

It is night again
I let down my silken hair
Over my shoulders
And open my thighs
Over my lover.
"Tell me, is there any part of me
That is not lovable?"

宿昔不梳頭
絲髮被兩肩
婉伸郎膝上
何處不可憐

The Chinese original does not contain any character that can possibly be translated as "thigh." It just tells the reader that the young woman in the poem stretches herself on the lap of her lover without identifying what part of her body is involved. With the insertion of the word "thigh" the coloration of the whole poem changes and the girl becomes an erotic persona we seldom meet in classical Chinese poetry. One thing that should be pointed out here is this deviation from the original text does not seem to be a blunder caused by Rexroth's inadequate Chinese because this time he has collaborated with a native speaker. A similar deviation can be found in another translation, "The Morning Sun Shines," in *Love and the Turning Year: One Hundred More Poems from the Chinese*:

The morning sun shines
Through the filigree shutters.
A wind full of light
Blows open her thin gauze robe.
A sly smile comes on her lips.
Her moth eyebrows arch
Over her beautiful eyes.

朝日照綺窗
光風動蠅羅
巧笑倩兩脣
美目揚雙蛾

In this case two key words, "open" in the fourth line and "sly" in the fifth line, do not exist in the original poem, which only describes how light and wind moves the girl's gauze robe and how her radiant smile adds to the beauty of her bright eyes. Again by inserting the words "open" and "sly," Rexroth fits this short descriptive poem into his erotic mysticism.

After we have seen how Rexroth deals with specific Chinese poets and poems under the guidance of "communion," it is profitable now to broaden our perspective and see the overall relation between Rexroth's concept of "communion" and Chinese literary tradition. By now we know that Rexroth's "communion" includes two aspects—humanism and mysticism. In Chinese literary tradition we can find both humanist and mystic elements, but they differ from Rexroth's communion. In Chinese history, humanism had been emphasized by the Confucian school. One of the most fundamental Confucian concepts *jun* 仁 can be roughly translated as "humanness." Many philosophers, most Confucians, had explained and discussed this important concept. In the twentieth chapter of *the Doctrine of the Mean* Confucius says: "Humanness is man." Linking humanness to another Confucian concept *yi* 義—"righteousness"—Mencius, the second most important figure in the Confucian school, summarizes the functions of these two concepts by claiming:

The content of humanness is to serve one's parents. And the content of righteousness is to obey one's elder brothers [*The Works of Mencius*, Li Lou I, chapter. 27].

Humanness in the Confucian canon serves as a brick to build and strengthen the social hierarchy. To Rexroth, who is an anarchist and thinks the State is the organization of the evil instincts of mankind, this concept of humanness with its hierarchical political overtones is unacceptable. And it seems to me this accounts, to a large extent, for the fact why Rexroth never mentions Confucius and the Confucian school in his writings about Chinese culture.

Instead, the Chinese philosophers Rexroth liked to talk about are Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. At first it seems that this is because these two Taoist philosophers deal with the concept of communion in their writings. But Taoist communion is an ontological rather than ethical concept as Rexroth thought it to be. Usually

Taoist communion means the communion between man and the universe or the essence of the universe, which the Taoist calls the Tao or the Way. The Tao is independent of human wills and the understanding of the Tao is an inner experience in which the distinction between self and non-self vanishes. It is an intuitive, immediate awareness rather than a mediate or intellectual process. However, in Rexroth's poetry the universe does not have its own meaning without human intervention. Ironically, he thinks this is a generally held idea in Chinese culture. Talking about Tu Fu, whom he regards as the representative of Chinese culture, he remarks:

Tu Fu comes from a saner, older, more secular culture than Homer and it is not a new discovery with him that the gods, the abstractions and forces of nature are frivolous, lewd, vicious, quarrelsome, and cruel, and only men's steadfastness, love, magnanimity, calm, and compassion redeem the nightbound world. It is not a discovery, culturally or historically, but it is the essence of his being as a poet [*An Autobiographical Novel* 319].

Rexroth's landscape meditations, which, like his love poems, form a significant and highly praised part of his poetry, are based on this understanding of Chinese philosophy. Judging by his views on nature, we can roughly divide these meditations into three groups. In the first group, as in "The Wheel Revolves," "Another Spring," and "Elegy on Encountering the Trouble of the World," the harmonious world of nature forms a contrast to confused human society. Sometimes this contrast strongly reminds the reader of the Romantic poetry in the West. In the second group, the meaning of nature is derived from human relations, as he asserts in "They Say This Isn't a Poem":

The order of the universe
Is only a reflection
Of the human will and reason.
...
The only order of nature
Is the orderly relation
Of one person to another.
Non-personal relations
Are by nature chaotic.
Personal relations are
The pattern through which we see
Nature as systematic [*CSP* 312].

In the third group, as in "Lute Music" and "Andree Rexroth," nature appears unconcerned about human affairs. However, in all these groups of poems the separation between man and the universe is obvious.

Once we realize the separation between man and the universe in Rexroth's poetry, we can better understand his cosmology which, at first glance, seems to bear some resemblance to Taoism because he sometimes uses Taoist terminology. Rexroth believes it is the female principle that gives birth to the universe, as he writes in his long poem "The Heart's Garden, the Garden's Heart":

The valley's soul is deathless.
It is called the dark woman.
The dark woman is the gate
To the root of heaven and earth.
If you draw her out like floss
She is inexhaustible [CLP 283].

This can be regarded as a translation of the sixth chapter of *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu:

穀神不死是謂元牝
元牝之門是謂天地根
縣縣若存用之不勤

To this short chapter Arthur Waley gives his translation:

The Valley Spirit never dies.
It is named the Mysterious Female.
And the Doorway of the Mysterious Female
Is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang.
It is there within us all the while;
Draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry.

Though closer to the original than Rexroth's version, Waley's translation also seems to treat the original text too literally. The key characters in this passage are *yuan* 元 and *ping* 牝. The first character *yuan* 元 means "primordial," though in ancient Chinese it is also interchangeable with *hsuan* 玄, which can be translated as either "dark" or "mysterious" as Rexroth and Waley do. The second character *ping* 牝 is wrongly translated as woman by Rexroth because this character is only used to designate some female birds and animals. Even Waley is not entirely correct in translat-

ing this character as “female” because in this case this character is used metaphorically to mean vacuity or passivity. Another similar example can be found in the metaphorical usage of the character *mu* 母 (mother) in the fifty-second chapter of *Tao Te Ching*:

天下有始以爲天下母

That which was the beginning of all things under heaven
We may speak of as the ‘mother’ of all things.

[*Tao Te Ching* 206. Trans. Arthur Waley]

Taking the metaphorical usage of *ping* 牝 into consideration, perhaps a better translation of the phrase *yuan ping* 元牝 should be “primordial void.” From this we can find in Taoism the origin of the universe is not limited to the female principle. We can even further argue that the dark woman in Rexroth’s translation resembles Mulktuth the Queen, a demiurge and a term to creation in Kabbalism, rather than the incarnation of “primordial void” which she stands for in the original text.

Based on the female principle, Rexroth’s cosmology is marked by an erotic mysticism that is illustrated in “Yin and Yang”:

Yin and Yang

It is spring once more in the Coast Range
Warm, perfumed, under the Easter moon.
The flowers are back in their places.
The birds back in their usual trees.
The winter stars set in the ocean.
The summer stars rise from the mountains.
The air is filled with atoms of quicksilver.
Resurrection envelops the earth.
Geometrical, blazing, deathless,
Animals and men march through heaven,
Pacing their secret ceremony.
The Lion gives the moon to the Virgin.
She stands at the crossroads of heaven,
Holding the full moon in her right hand,
A glittering wheat ear in her left.
The climax of the rite of rebirth
Has ascended from the underworld
Is proclaimed in light from the zenith.
In the underworld the sun swims
Between the fish called Yes and No. [CSP 23]

The title of this poem, “Yin and Yang,” refers to a famous Taoist concept that becomes extremely pervasive as time goes on.

Originated in *I Ching*, *yin* and *yang* at first mean two primordial breaths that constitute the essence of the universe. They are contradictory as well as complementary to each other. In the same book it is also recognized that *yin* and *yang* can exist in the same object. The symbiosis of *yin* and *yang* are further emphasized by Lao Tzu, who says in the forty-second chapter of *Tao Te Ching*:

Everything carries the *yin* and embraces the *yang*, and through the blending of the material force they achieve harmony.

With Chuang Tzu, *yin* and *yang* gains another new meaning—the balance or harmony between opposites:

Great Imperial Accord said, "The *yin* and *yang* shine on each other, maim each other, heal each other; the four seasons succeed each other, give birth to each other, slaughter each other" [*The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* 291. Trans. Burton Watson].

To summarize all these discussions on *yin* and *yang*, we would conclude that *yin* and *yang* compose a single ontological concept. However, this is not the case in Rexroth's poem, which visibly refers to the Chinese concept. Couched in a Western frame of reference, the poem, with its astrological, mythological associations and connotations, indicates that the universe is united through fertility or eros. As a result, the meaning of the Chinese philosophical concept *yin* and *yang* has been given a gendered meaning unlike the original.

Now we may conclude that Rexroth's understanding of classical Chinese poetry is based on his central concept of "communion," which is conditioned by his Western cultural heritage as well as by a perception of existential need in the contemporary social situation. Therefore his deviation from the Chinese original texts in both his translation and imitation of classical Chinese poetry should be explained in terms of his social milieu, personal philosophy and political leaning.

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