

# A Book as a Cross-cultural Landscape: A Review of *Kenneth Rexroth and Chinese Culture*

**He Zhengbing**

Foreign Studies College, Hunan Normal University, China

36 Yuelu Road, Changsha, 410081, China

Email: xwzy528@163.com

**Abstract** Inspired by the poetic views of Ezra Pound and the opinions about the methods coping with Chinese and Western theories which is proposed by Mr. Zhang Longxi, Professor Zheng Yanhong takes a specific view both on the whole and detailed levels and puts Rexroth's poems into Chinese cultural context to investigate the poetic elements which exist deep in the historical, cultural, intellectual and psychological contexts. Finally the author achieves a unique understanding of Kenneth Rexroth's poetry and restores its value. The significance of this work lies not only in the uniqueness of its topic but also in the universality which is concluded by analyzing the texts and their surrounding elements from multiple perspectives. More significantly, to some extent it has broken through the academic constraints of popular notion of 'theories first'. With the spirit of Pu Xue, a Chinese traditional textual criticism school, this book promotes a kind of return to the research of the nature of literature from the pure application of non-literature theories. In such a way it achieves the goal of bringing together the west and the east culturally and innovatively.

**Key words** Zheng Yanhong; Kenneth Rexroth and Chinese Culture; academic value

In recent years, Chinese scholars have shifted their focuses from the macroscopic level to the microscopic level of case study on American poets and their translations. Fruitful accomplishments have been achieved in the fields concerning such big names as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, etc. It is another surprise that *Kenneth Rexroth and Chinese culture* written by Professor Zheng Yanhong has been published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 2012. On this work of such a high quality this paper will comment from the following four aspects: research topics, research perspectives, research interests and research methods.

## 1. A Wise and Discerning Choice of the Research Topics

Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) may be an unfamiliar name to Chinese readers, but his Chinese name Wang Honggong is well known in China. As a celebrated poet in America he was as gorgeous as Ezra Pound in many respects, and he wrote poems, art comments and translated verses. He was completely an organizer and leader in the world of letters. Rexroth was one of the main leaders of the San Francisco Renaissance, labeled as the “father of the Beats.” He was also a mentor and inspiration to the Beats, including Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and others. He loved Chinese culture and was considered as the most outstanding poet of those who introduced and promoted Chinese culture in American poetry circles. He translated and published four books of Chinese poetry collections: *100 Poems from the Chinese* (1956), *Li Ch'ing-chao, Complete Poems* (1979), *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China*(1972), *Love and the Turning Year : 100 More Poems from the Chinese* (1970). The last two books of those were translated with the collaboration of Chinese scholars Zhong Ling. He also wrote many essays on Chinese culture, such as *Sung Culture, Science and Civilization in China, The Tao of Painting, The Chinese Classic Novel in Translation, Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, Tu Fu:Poems, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Records of the Grand Historian of China*. Besides translating and introducing Chinese culture, he adopted poetic elements in Buddhist and Taoist works for his own poetic creation, and by imitating some poetic skills of ancient Chinese poems he had become one of the most prominent poets who were good at absorbing foreign cultures. On this point he was highly evaluated internationally by scholars. One's literary status is not always and necessarily relevant to his academic status. It may be the case that the one who is very celebrated in the world of letters is obscure instead in the academic circles. For example, during the time from 1920s to 1940s, Eliot and Yeats' work had long been the topics in auditoriums of universities and Pound had been rarely mentioned. But nowadays as an undoubtedly important field in academic world the research on Pound is always in full swing. By the same token Rexroth now is facing the embarrassment as Pound has been treated in his obscure years, and his deserved status has not been recognized completely. Donald Gutierrez has concluded that : firstly, as early as in 1927, he moved to San Francisco ,long away from the celebrities' greenhouse, the cultural center of New York ; secondly, although he is very active in the social and cultural circles on the west coast, he always kept his distance from those important figures in the academic centers on the east coast , and as an opinionated man, he seldom echoed the mainstream literary criticism ; thirdly, his independent personality cost him the lose of some academic allies(Gutierrez 142). Besides those, professor Zheng Yanhong believes that his political views have played a main role for his long

obscurity. As a radical anarchist, he often participated in activities of the Communist Party of the United States. His political opinions caused him to be unwelcome to the society and thus his academic status was affected adversely. So Rexroth's poetry has never become a popular topic in academic circles, he has long been ignored in poetry circles in America and the research concerning him and his poetry remains empty in many respects.

It's a wise and discerning choice that Professor Zheng takes *Rexroth*'s poetry as the research object. The author abandons the cliché of some western scholars and expands Rexroth's poetry landscape from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture and poetics, meanwhile a kind of system and integrity of research are realized practically and prospectively for a poetic survey deep into textual details and on a large scale. Therefore, this book, which centers on the research of Kenneth Rexroth, has an important and innovative significance to the Sino-US academic fields. Besides its wise and discerning choice of the research topics we can learn much more from the other respects.

## 2. A Comprehensive Research and Mutual Proof with Interdisciplinary Views

Mencius said, "Is it right to recite one's poems and reading his books without comprehending his life? We should date back to the times he lived in and then be friends with him." Mencius means that it is not enough to understand one's works by reciting his poems and reading his books; furthermore, we should have a better understanding of his time, which is to recall the history and be friends with the ancients. The great scholar Chen Yinque also considered that people who undertake academic research should take a comprehensive and sympathetic attitude toward the research object. He said,

As for the remarks of the ancients, we shall not make comments unless we have stood in ancients' boots and grasped the textual meaning, because the works written by the ancients mostly have something to speak of. If the context and the background where he is from have not been fully understood, then no comment shall be made. (陈寅恪 179)

His great works, "*Biography of Liu Rushi*" and "*a Paper Commenting on Poetry of Baijuyi*" are written in the way of mutual and textual proof between history and poetry to integrate cultural, economic, social and psychological analyses so as to prove the authenticity of literature and history. Coincidentally, Fredric Jameson, a contemporary American neo-Marxist, puts forward the rationale of a comprehensive study which also requires people to grasp the relationship and integrity of things. He believes that:

Everything is so dependent on other things that one should integrate the life and experience perceived by people as a whole in the analysis of specific works, and that all the relevant events, all the partial facts and elements, should be grasped as a general part of the whole process. ( 弗雷德里克 · 詹姆逊 282)

Jameson bases his “comprehensive study” on “dialectical criticism”, which does not predetermine the result and scope, or judge aesthetics by the mono-value and mono-structure. The research perspective of this book is deeply rooted in classical academic tradition, about which the author expounds that:

Withstanding the test of time, this kind of research which combines the abstract theoretical speculations, detailed texts, social backgrounds of history and personal experiences of the author, is comparatively according with the laws of the literary movement. ( 郑燕虹 11)

The topic of this book is “Kenneth Rexroth and Chinese culture”. There are varieties of definitions of “culture” which arouses lots of hot debates. This book adopts the view of Raymond Williams, a British literature critic, who believes that culture is related with people’s overall lifestyle and is the whole forms of thoughts and customs, and is closely connected with people’s impeccable ideals. Chinese culture has a great influence on Rexroth’s views on poetry, life and ideal. The book comprehensively and systematically investigates the relationship between Rexroth and Chinese culture. In his childhood, Rexroth often went to a theater in Chicago with his mother to watch Guangdong drama. The colorful costumes and touching vocals of the actors attracted him deeply. The author keenly points out that although the experience of watching Chinese drama in his childhood had sown the seeds of love for Chinese culture in his heart, his relish in Chinese culture derives not merely from his childish interests, but mainly it is the result of his deep research into Chinese culture and his innovative concepts formed in the practices of exploring into the Chinese poetry art. This book has a profound revelation on Rexroth’s motive of love for Chinese culture. By analyzing Rexroth’s translation and views on poetry and cultural criticism, the main chapters of this book are focused on the research of relationship between him and Taoism and Buddhism and on the influence brought by Chinese classical poetry on his writing. These research perspectives are not for service of narrating individually, but are closely linked with backgrounds of the poet’s times, his personal experiences, and the whole tides of poetic movement to analyze specific texts with theoretical thinking. Meanwhile, the book does not adopt the western theories mechanically, or put some of

the concepts and methods as a panacea into any textual analysis, and the author insists that:

(She)has no intention of applying a certain foreign literary theory throughout the study; yet, the very kind of related concept, scope, research perspective and methods of analysis provided by the foreign literary theories (such as theories of “new Criticism”, “historicism,” “impact studies”, “cultural misreading” etc.) undoubtedly have some functions as reference and guidance. (11)

As Rexroth’s views on poetry are discussed in the first chapter, the author by making a comparison of the translation theories among Pound, Dryden, and Qian Zhongshu, unscrambles Rexroth’s views--- “translation of poetry is a consistent course of action”, “the standard of success of poetry translation is assimilation”, “poetry translation can inspire the poets”. The author’s analysis on Rexroth in this way is not for a simple analogy with some celebrities’ viewpoints, but for a deep dissection into his translation theories and translation works and for an indication of its referential value to the contemporary poetry translation. There is a controversy on whether Rexroth’s translations of classical Chinese poetry are faithful to the original. Some regard his translation as unfaithful, whereas some classify his translation as a “creative translation” or “innovative translation.” For example, in Professor Zhong Ling’s opinion, Pound and Rexroth’s translations are ‘innovative translation’. She says:

Translation of Chinese poetry by Pound, Wei Li, Binner, Rexroth which I call ‘innovative translations’ is different from those for academic research, all of which are translated by scholars who base their translations on the principle of fidelity to the original text.( 钟玲 41)

On the basis of a comprehensive study and an objective and dialectical analysis of Rexroth’s translations, Professor Zheng puts forward her own idea:

It is not enough to simply summarize Rexroth’s translations as ‘innovative translation’, for his translations from Chinese poetry to English are in a complicated situation, and worth a further study. Firstly, he has translated a large quantity of Chinese poetry into English, which involves lots of poets and influences a group of young poets. Secondly, his translation practice can be divided into two periods: in the early phase, during which his main works are *100 Poems from the Chinese, Love and the Turning Year: 100 More Poems from the Chinese*, he translated Chinese poetry by consulting other people’s translations;

in the later stage, he completed the translation of *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China*, and *Li Ching-chao, Complete Poems* in collaboration with Zhong Ling. From a faithful view of translation, the later two kinds of works are apparently better, because they are highly scrutinized for the accuracy with advice of a Chinese scholar. ( 郑燕虹 30)

So she classifies Rexroth's translations into three categories:

We call the translation of a poem comparatively faithful, if the majority of the verses are paraphrasing translation and a few are parody translation; the "less faithful" translation is that in which there are both paraphrasing translation and parody translation, and the former takes the main proportion, if the latter takes more proportion, then it is called 'unfaithful'. (31)

The book then analyzes the three categories by exemplifying *Rexroth's* translation of Dufu's poems.

### **3. A Total Immersion in Poetics and Details**

When talking about his way of reading, Zeng Guofan once said, "a good reader should treat the book as water, and his heart as flower, paddy, fish and washing of feet. Then it is easy to understand the word 'immersion'." Zeng proposes one should be infatuated with reading, and investigate deeply. The Modern British and American poet Ezra Pound also emphasizes in his literary theory that we should grasp the details for a deeper understanding. He said, "Obviously, if we really want to know something, we need to know exactly a lot of relevant details." ( 叶维廉 9) Pound as a poet proposed a method of distinguishing details from the view of evaluating poems, and he emphasized that researchers should be immersed in the poetic conception and meaning of the poetry. His opinion coincides with Zeng's view on reading. Professor Zheng accomplishes her work with so many years of efforts and explorations that she calls herself just a little ant working patiently and carefully. We can see that her way of pursuing scholarship has embodied the spirit of traditional intellectuals. Eight years ago, when she was studying for a Ph.D. at Sun Yat-sen University, Kenneth Rexroth had been her main research subject. First, she collected relevant material in China, and asked her friends to search information in America. During her Ph.D. study, she was invited to be an assistant scholar and work on the study of Rexroth's translations in the translation department of Chinese University of Hong Kong. Then she got to know Professor Zhong Ling who is an expert on Rexroth too, works at Hong Kong Baptist University, has interviewed Rexroth quite a few times and translated two collections

of Chinese poems with him. When studying in the U.S. the author of this book has ever interviewed Professor Zhong twice, sought advice from her by email, and received much first-hand information sent by Professor Zhong. By comprehensively analyzing the material, the author makes a deep exploration into the process of Rexroth's creation, the relationships among his works, and the mutual relevancy between Rexroth and other poets. Then she explores all of Rexroth's translation of Chinese poems, makes a detailed analysis and classifies all the poems translated by Rexroth, and also she explores some of the process of translating detailedly and thoroughly. For example, in the '100 Poems from the Chinese', Rexroth selected 13 poems of Mei Yaochen, six of which are mourning poems for his deceased wife, which are imbued with sincere emotions and are Rexroth's favorite. Professor Zheng firmly believes that the reason why Rexroth chooses these poems is related with his own life experiences. Rexroth's wife, Andrée Rexroth, who was extremely intelligent, and good at painting, had so much in common with Rexroth that they lived a happy life after their marriage. Unfortunately, Andrée died in her prime, at 38, for which he felt so grieved that he wrote several poems to lament her. It's no wonder that Mei Yaochen's mourning poems aroused an echo in his mind, so when he translated Mei Yaochen's poems, he melt his own emotions and experiences into the translation. By citing examples and making compares between interpretations of the translation and his original creation, the author comes to a conclusion: human emotions have something in common; Rexroth's inspiration of translation is from the exploration for a resonance of the emotions between the translator and the author. In the chapter of Rexroth's Emotional Appeal of Chinese Culture, the author firstly makes a survey on many important writers' impressions on china since the 19th century: although Emerson respects Confucius, he harbors some contempt and resentment for Chinese; in poet Sylvia Plath' works, images relative to Chinese people and things are often negative; while Pound, Buck, Snyder, Rexroth take a quite positive attitude toward Chinese culture, and they borrowed Chinese poetic ideas and cultural elements to remedy the corrupt parts of western culture and innovate the modern literature. Part of the valuable significance of this book lies not in a simple assurance of Rexroth's love of Chinese culture, but in this conclusion:

His keen passion towards Chinese culture does not only come from his interests formed in his childhood, but mainly it is the result of his deep research into Chinese culture and his innovative concepts formed in the process of exploring into the Chinese poetry art.“ This conclusion is drawn by the author from the investigation of the facts that Rexroth had perused *outlaws of the marsh*, *The Red Mansion*, *The Golden Lotus*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and some other

artistic works of poetry and paintings in the period of Song dynasty. ( 郑燕虹 223)

#### **4. An Exploration into a Specific Topic in Great Textual Details**

The esthetician Benedetto Croce thought that:

Language activity is not the manifestation of thought and logic, but a kind of fantasy, which is displayed vividly, and passionately in forms of images. Therefore, it mingle with the poetry activity, and they are mutually synonym. What is mentioned here means the real and pure language which is the nature of language. And even when the language is used as a tool for thought and logic, and used as symbols of some views, it should still maintain its nature.” ( 贝尼季托 · 克罗奇 41)

Therefore, there is an inner link between language and poetic spirit (that is the nature of poetry language), but in the academic field, poetry usually is taken as an objective linguistic material, so it is hard to completely explain the intrinsic link between language and poetic spirit. Professor Zheng starts her research in a unique way which is based on the analysis of the text. She has been exploring the language material for the core of the poetic spirit and depicted the historic narration of the poetic images and conceptions of Chinese classical literary theories. In such a poetic context she analyzes the different poetic conceptions displayed in Rexroth's poetry; also, by analyzing Rexroth's texts, she reveals his assimilation and application of the techniques of Chinese poetry, and excavates the Taoism implied in them; with her poetic perception, she catches the profound implication of Rexroth's poetry which originates from the poet's understanding and appreciation of 'Kong', studies the characteristics of his assimilation of the language form of Zen classics, which the poet applies in his creation, and reveals religious experience and Zen implication in meditation which are abounds in his poetry. This kind of academic effect of such a way of research can be described as what Wai-lim Yip puts, “(this way of research) is centered on the aesthetic considerations”, and “causes the images of poetry to reappear” so that the researchers can take part in the creation and enjoy the writer's delight and the consequence of interpretation will not be so dominant to overshadow the poetry's original meaning ( 叶维廉 9). It is well known that Chinese classical poets and scholars take Zen and Taoism as theoretical sources for a deep survey of the poetic experiences which constantly depend on the subjective understanding of the unity of nature and human. The differences between Chinese poetics and western

logical methods have led to a helpless silence for Chinese scholars in the international academic field. This kind of situation is true at home.

To some extent the history of Chinese literature criticisms in 20th century is the history for all kinds of schools of western criticisms to performing by turn in China and Chinese cultural circles.” (曹顺庆 96-100)

Against such a backdrop professor Zheng Yanhong has been groping for a new way which is undoubtedly pioneering and innovative. It's significance lies not only in establishing the cultural identity of Chinese poetics , but also in the efforts of digging out some of the universality of Chinese poetics and applying it to the analysis of the discourse of Western literature , and finally reaching a mutual understanding culturally and internationally. Essentially, this is a confidence-based dialogue about culture and poetics. This kind of confidence is solid because of its authentic origins and rich theoretical foundations. In the introduction the author quoted Mr. Zhang Longxi 's words:

We can not apply the western theories mechanically, but we should reduce all the theories to the basic and original theoretical issues and depend on many respects such as language, expression, understanding and interpretation to investigate the methods for expressing and solving problems both in views of china and the west.” (张隆溪 41)

In the book the author always insists such a position of an equally dialogue. For examples , while discussing the term, “emotional fit” which is proposed according to Rexroth 's translation, the author believes that Rexroth 's so-called “ assimilation” quite coincidentally reaches the same end of interpretation as the “ideal perfection” proposed by professor Qian Zhongshu. And she quotes material from “Seven Essays” by Mr. Qian for a comparative analysis. She also investigates the nature of poetry translation and finds that the significance of translation is mainly focused on the inspiration it brings for writing. Thus the systematic research of Chinese poetic elements in Rexroth's poems is developed accordingly. In another example, the relationship of those double concepts in a series of Chinese poetic terms such as “heart and object”, “sense and image”, “emotion and nature” is systematically analyzed and an ultimate purport is achieved as what the great scholar Wang Guowei had put:

Nature is a word which can be provided with a richer connotation related to all kinds of true feelings beyond the literal meaning of natural scenes. So the poetry

imbued with both natural scenes and true feelings can be called works of high quality. Otherwise it can't count as excellent poetry." (周锡山 26)

Taking such points of view as a theoretical context, the author expounds the relationship between emotion and nature in the poems and translations of Rexroth. Her interpretation with a textual comparison is categorized into the following three ways: to veil emotion for a better visibility of natural images, to express emotion with natural images, to express emotion through natural images.

As important theses concerning cultural development of China in this century, the inheritance of ancient culture and the communication with foreign culture are seldom discussed synthetically and valuably in forms of case study. This book, exploring into a specific topic in great textual details has to some degree solved the problem as how to understand and absorb the western cultures on the basis of inheritance of Chinese culture. Thus there appears a kind of new academic landscape which differs greatly from some current ones which purely advocate the adoption of western theories. In many quotations the author uses as the basis of argumentation we can figure out that she has inherited the classic experiences, perspectives and academic methods such as the way of using mutual and multiple evidences with interdisciplinary views of poetics, philosophy, and history. Basically this is a valid way to incorporate the western culture and refine the Chinese culture.

## 5. Summary

Professor Zheng puts the daily life and academic experiences of Rexroth into analysis of textual details for a deeper understanding of his poetry and translations. She takes some key concepts of Taoism and Zen as the referential theories as well. Thus a whole new synthesized perspective is emerging for the mutual understanding of the world literatures. And finally a new poetic value is achieved by promoting an academic universality which is concluded by analyzing the texts and their surrounding elements from multiple perspectives. When talking about the influence of Rexroth's works the author writes:

His artistic accomplishment is a unique and individual poetic kingdom where there are devotions of special poetic forms, precious experiences of writing and landscapes of poetry with incorporated elements of Sino-US cultures. (郑燕虹 249)

By the same token, this book on Rexroth's poetry is also a unique kingdom which abound beautiful landscapes of academic innovations inspired by the ideas of ancients

and contemporaries.

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