ABSTRACT

Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982), an American translator of classical Chinese poetry in the 20th century, was also a poet with an ecological worldview. When Rexroth moved to California in 1927, his poetry and philosophy of life became ecological. He then wrote many poems on the relationship between humanity and nature and became a forerunner in the history of American eco-poetry. His ecopoetics and ecosophy exerted great influence on his translation practice, making him an important figure among translators of three generations who discovered the ecological aspect of classical Chinese poetry and make up the eco-tradition in the history of English translation of classical Chinese poetry. It needs to be noted that Rexroth’s entire translation activity presents an ecological character. This important aspect remains unexplored by academia, which has paid much attention to this poet-translator’s “creative treason,” and to the translation as his own poetry. Taking a close reading of his translations of over 400 classical Chinese, this study holds that much of his “creative treason” can be explained through an ecocritical viewpoint. Therefore, this research employs ecocriticism to delve into the ecological dimension of Rexroth’s translation of classical Chinese poetry, to explore the human-nature relationship in his translation, to reread his translations from a “green” perspective, and to reveal the eco-value of his translations in contemporary times.

Several research questions are answered in this study. From the macro-perspective: What kind of studies are in the ecological path of translation studies? Can ecocriticism be applied in translation studies? From the meso-perspective: Why is there an ecological concern in the translation of classical Chinese poetry? What is the eco-tradition of English translation of classical Chinese poetry? From the micro-perspective: What kind of ecopoetics and ecological thoughts are embodied in Rexroth’s translation? How does this manifest in his translation choices, translation strategies, and translation impact?

The ecocritical analysis will be used for the whole of Rexroth’s translation activity, from the selection process of the poems to the translation strategy, and then the influence of his translations. This study holds that Rexroth makes an ecopoetic interpretation and a proper “construction” of classical Chinese poetry. In fact, Chinese traditional philosophies and culture contain a multitude of nature views and ecological
wisdom. With such philosophical influences, ecopoetics became a particularly important feature in classical Chinese poetry, and this has to be emphasized in the process of translating it. However, due to various sources of Rexroth’s ecological worldview from East and West, the ecopoetics present in Rexroth’s translation is not identical to that found in classical Chinese poetry. The result of his interpretation is more of a cross-cultural ecopoetic rewriting. This is related to a number of his ideas: anti-anthropocentrism, organic philosophy, ecofeminism, wilderness experience, sense of place, material eco-view, ideas of ecological utopia “the community of love,” anti-war attitudes, anarchism, selfless poetics and others. It is also influenced by the historical context, cultural trends and social reality — the ecological crisis and the rise of ecological movements at that time.

The aim of this study is, on one hand, to reread and revalue ecocritically Rexroth’s translation and provide explanations for many cases of his “creative treason” through ecocriticism, so as to dig out the ecological implications and eco-value of his translation in contemporary times. Through Rexroth’s case, more academic attention is expected to be paid to the ecological aspect of the translation of classical Chinese poetry. On the other hand, this study intends to extend the ecological path of translation studies and incorporate ecocriticism into this field, which currently gives more weight to studies on metaphorical-sense ecology (translation system) than those on the human-nature relationship, so as to highlight responsibilities of translation studies in the era of ecological crises and the rise of environmental humanities.

Key Words: Kenneth Rexroth, English translation of classical Chinese poetry, ecocriticism, the ecological path of translation studies