

Li Ch'ing-chao; Complete Poems. Translated and edited by Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung. New York: New Directions, 1979. Pp. 119. Biography, Notes. \$9.95.

Although the translation of Chinese poetry into English has been a growing industry in recent years, this is the first time that a major American poet has devoted a volume of translations exclusively to Li Ch'ing-chao, "universally considered to be China's greatest woman poet" (p. 83). Whether or not she is "universally condered" as such, Li Ch'ing-chao is indisputably the most accomplished of women poets in China, unrivalled in her originality. Her poetry in the *tz'u* 詞 genre (sometimes translated as "lyrics"), combines rich imagery and natural rhythm with a disarming ease in expressing every nuance of her moods and feelings. Moreover, she always observes the strictest specifications of the intricate metrical schemes prescribed by the individual musical tunes which characterize the *tz'u*. Although the bulk of her writings has been lost to posterity, the amount of her poetry that has survived testifies to her mastery of the language and her exquisite craftsmanship in versification.

³Wong Yoon-wah, "A Chinese View of Style: The Theoretical Bases of Style in the *Shih-p'in*," Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang University, Occasional Paper no. 6, 1975.

This outstanding woman writer of the Sung dynasty is here presented to the modern English-speaking world through the collaboration of Kenneth Rexroth, who considers Tu Fu "the major influence" on his own poetry, and Ling Chung, a native speaker of Chinese and a poet in her own right. Earlier, the two collaborated in the production of an anthology of the works of Chinese women poets, *The Orchid Boat* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), in which nine of Li Ch'ing-chao's poems were featured.¹ A veteran translator of poetry from several languages, Rexroth had already brought forth single-handedly two other anthologies of Chinese poems: *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (1956) and *Love and the Turning Year: One Hundred More Poems from the Chinese* (1970). Both contain poems by Li Ch'ing-chao.

The present volume culminates Rexroth's long fascination with Li's poetry. Even though the *Complete Poems* does not include all her extant poems, which are found in *Li Ch'ing-chao chi* 李清照集, and on which these translations are based (p. 95), we are here given fifty of her *tz'u* (including some poems of uncertain authorship), and all seventeen of her *shih* 詩. (including two couplets which are remnants of two lost poems). The translations are thematically grouped under seven headings: "Youth," "Loneliness," "Exile," "His [her husband's] Death," "Politics," "Mysticism," and "Old Age." As arbitrary as this arrangement may seem, it is perhaps more sensible than using the traditional genre divisions of *tz'u* and *shih*, which are indistinguishable here, for the translated versions, with their run-on lines, do not conform to the metrical patterns of either genre. Chronological arrangement would be next to impossible, because most of these poems are undated, and some of them are undatable even using internal evidence. One of the main drawbacks to the thematic grouping, however, is that it makes difficult the identification of the original poems upon which these translations are based. The problem is further compounded by the loose renditions of the tune-titles, and the sometimes totally new titles assigned by the translators.

When a prominent American poet shows sufficient interest in Chinese poetry to take the trouble to render it into his native language, his translation is likely to be appraised primarily for its literary merit, rather than for its fidelity to the original. Thus we have William Carlos Williams praising Rexroth's *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* as "one of the most brilliantly sensitive books of poems in the American idiom it has even been my good fortune to read."² Indeed, readers should be grateful for glimpses of the unfamiliar beauty of Chinese poetry made possible by Rexroth's skill. Even specialists in Chinese literature, awed by the poet's renown, tend to ignore his linguistic inaccuracies and dismiss his occasional misinterpretations as poetic license. After all, it is through Rexroth's verbal magic that the vivacious image of the poet as a captivating young coquette is recaptured in these lines:

I bought a spray of Spring in bloom
From a flower carrying pole.
It is covered with tiny teardrops
That still reflect the pink clouds of dawn
And traces of morning dew.
Lest my lover should think

¹ *The Orchid Boat* (New York & London: McGraw-Hill, 1972) actually contains seven poems under "Li Ch'ing-chao," and two others that are traditionally attributed to Li Ch'ing-chao. But one of the latter, "To the tune 'Paint My Lips Red,'" was arbitrarily assigned by the translators to "An Anonymous Courtesan," in *The Orchid Boat*, and has therefore been excluded from the present volume. The poem in question describes a young girl, after sporting on a swing, drenched in perspiration; she feels embarrassed when she runs into a guest. This perfectly innocent vignette, which could very well have been written by Li Ch'ing-chao in her early days, is misconstrued to mean something profane. For some obscure reasons, the translators have taken the "guest" to mean a customer of a brothel, and the swing as "an obvious cliché for sexual intercourse." Cf. *Love and the Turning Year*, p. 129.

² "The Two New Books by Kenneth Rexroth," *Poetry*, XC (June, 1957), p. 183.

The flowers are lovelier than my face
I pin it slanting in my thick black hair
And ask him to compare us.

減字木蘭花

賣花擔上，買得一枝春欲放。淚染輕勻，猶帶形骸
曉霧寒。怕郎猜道：奴面不如花面好；雲鬢斜醫，
徒要教郎比並看。

In contrast, here is a poem reflecting the quiet mood of acquiescence as the aging poet faces the evening of her life alone:

Year after year in the snow, intoxicated,
I have put the new plum blossoms
In my hair.
Now the fallen petals
Only depress me.
All I have gained is a dress
Wet with crystal tears.
This year I am at the corner
Of the sea and the edge of Heaven.
I am old and lonely.
My temples have turned white.
I realize that the evening wind
Is too strong for me.
It is no longer possible
For me to contemplate
The blossoming plums.

(p. 79)

清平樂

年年雪裏，常插梅花醉，接盡梅花無好意，贏得滿
衣清淚。今年海角天涯，蕭蕭兩鬢生華。看取晚來
風勢，故應難看梅花。

However, one demands more from a translation assisted by a native speaker, for such collaboration presumably gains credence in fidelity to the original. Judging by the present revisions of some of the poems that appeared in Rexroth's earlier anthologies, it seems to be the intention of the translators to improve the reliability as well as the readability of their rendition. For example, the famous lines of Li Ch'ing-chao: 簾捲西風人比黃花瘦 (literally: curtain rolls [by] west Wind / person compares [with] yellow flower thinner), which appear in *Love and the Turning Year* as

Now when the West Wind flaps the screens,
I am more frail than the orchid petals.³

now read

The West Wind blows the curtains
And I am frailer than the yellow chrysanthemums.

(p. 14)

for the Chinese term 黃花 (literally "yellow flower") is a commonly accepted synonym for

³ "To the tune 'Drunk Under Flower Shadows'" in *Love and the Turning Year*, p. 93.

chrysanthemum, whose predominant color is yellow. Moreover, it is the chrysanthemum's slender petals, not those of the orchid, that suggest the poet's frailty or thinness. Also, it is the chrysanthemum that blooms in, and withstands, the autumnal west wind.

Another poem, "Thoughts from the Women's Quarter," reads:

Year after year I have watched
My jade mirror. Now my rouge
And cream sicken me. It is one more
Year that he has not come back.
My flesh shakes when a letter
Comes from South of the river.
I cannot drink wine since he left,
But sorrow has drunk up all my tears.
I have lost my mind, far-off
In the jungle mists of the South.
The Gates of Heaven are nearer
Than the body of my beloved.

(p. 34)

生查子

年年玉鏡臺，梅蕊宮妝困。今歲不歸來，怕見江南
信。酒從別後疎，淚向愁中盡。遙想楚雲深，人遠
天涯近。

Compare the last five lines with those of an earlier version:

But autumn has drunk up all my tears.
I have lost my mind, far off
In the jungle mists of the South.
The gates of Heaven are nearer
Than the body of my beloved.⁴

Other than the substitution of "sorrow" for "autumn" (because Rexroth had misread the character 愁 *ch'ou* for 秋 *ch'iu*—which must have been pointed out by his co-translator), there is no appreciable improvement in the revision. For instance, the last two lines, although aesthetically acceptable, have lost the subtlety of the original line (literally: 人遠天涯近 person / far / heaven edge near). Through the catalytic ministrations of the translators, the abstract "heaven's edge" is concretized into "gates of Heaven," and the ambiguity of the "person" is solidified into "the body of my beloved." These lines, reverberating the sensuous imagery in lines 5 and 6 ("My flesh shakes when a letter / comes from South of the river"), are perhaps intended by the translators for erotic interpretation, since the "gate" is a known Freudian symbol.

Of the same poem one may ask how the tune-title "The Boat of Stars" is derived from the original title 生查子 *sheng-ch'a'tzu* (*crataegus cuneata*), which is a plant related to the hawthorn family. The character 查 *ch'a* has nothing to do with either "boat" or "stars," but is a variation of 槎 or 檣 (pronounced *cha*). When treating the same tune-title in her monograph on Li Ch'ing-chao (1966), Hu Pin-ching showed truly scholarly humility by saying, "As the meaning of this title is unclear to me, it has been left untranslated."⁵

To span the distance in time and space, it seems to be the translator's prerogative to interpret and explicate delicate sentiment and subtle expression in less delicate and less subtle terms.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵ Hu Pin-ching, *Li Ch'ing-chao*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), p. 35n.

Likewise, exotic imagery, such as 山枕 *shan-chen* (pillow or head-rest with one side protruding in the shape of a mountain, usually made of jade or porcelain), is converted into a "pile of cushions" (p. 23), and *sheng-huang* 笙簧 (reed-pipe instrument) to "mouth organ" (p. 6), since those readers who have not been to an Oriental art museum might not be able to imagine that these were real objects, and might dismiss them as sheer *chinoiserie*. These kinds of liberties in translation are acceptable and perhaps necessary to remove the mental barrier between the Western reader and Chinese classical poetry. As T. S. Eliot once commented, in reference to Pound's translation of *Cathay*: "When a foreign poet is successfully done into the idiom of our language and our own time, we believe that he has been 'translated'; we believe that through this translation we really at last get the original."⁶

Some other linguistic inaccuracies are less defensible. The most notable is the misreading of the name of 張說 *Chang Yüeh* (665-731), a famous poet, painter and statesman of the T'ang period. Here his name is romanized as "Chang Shuo" (p. 57, and again on p. 106). Although the modern pronunciation for 說 is *shuo*, any informed Chinese should know that in classical reading 說 is equivalent to 悅 *yueh* in pronunciation as well as in meaning. Such a blunder can hardly be attributed to Ling Chung. Should she take the blame, since she is responsible for the "Biography of Li Ch'ing-chao," and most likely for all the "Notes" in the book, one must take into consideration her deference to the whims of Rexroth, who was the subject of her dissertation, and who likely commands her adulation. In some instances, when she fails to persuade the senior poet to stick close to the Chinese text, she so stipulates in the Notes, as in the case of 東君 *Tung-chün* (p. 97), which was rendered more accurately in *The Orchid Boat* (p. 37) as "The Lord of Spring," no doubt at her urging. But in the revised version in this volume, it retains the rendering of a still earlier version in *One Hundred Poems*: "My Lord has gone away to the East," for which she does not wish to be held responsible (p. 97).

While the "Biography of Li Ch'ing-chao" and the Notes provide valuable information for understanding the poems, I have reservations about the reliability of some of the explanations. For example, we are told that the feast on the ninth day of the ninth month, was "a day of outdoor love-making . . . Feast of the Dead" (p. 98). This seems to be a groundless fabrication. Or, "swings in Chinese love poetry have an erotic significance, and apparently once had a family ritual connection with the Day of Cold Food" (p. 100), again a fanciful assertion. Topping all is the note for the poem "Sorrow of Departure," which states: "Orchid boats are floating pleasure houses. Rexroth points out that 'orchid boat' is also a common metaphor for the female sexual organ, as in this poem" (p. 101). "Floating pleasure house" smacks of the "house of ill repute," which is a most unlikely spot for a respectable woman of Li's station to visit. Moreover, the poem clearly states that she is mounting the orchid boat "alone." Worse still is Rexroth's claim, with Ling Chung's tacit agreement, that the "orchid boat" is "a common metaphor" for the female sexual organ.⁷ (Ironically, the orchid has been to the Chinese a symbol of purity and nobility, stemming from the *Li-sao* 離騷 tradition.)

Misrepresentations and misleading secondary readings of this kind need to be pointed out so that the reader may be forewarned that the erotomania is typical of Rexroth but alien to the Sung woman poet, however unconventional she might have appeared to her contemporaries. Ever since Freudian psychology made its inroad into literary criticism, erotic speculations and interpretations have come into vogue among translators as well as creative writers. With the ideal combination of Rexroth's poetic talent and Ling Chung's knowledge of Chinese, their translations should recapture the aesthetic quality of the original faithfully and accurately, without having to resort to Freudian interpretation for added attraction.

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⁶ T. S. Eliot, ed. "Introduction," *The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p. 15.

⁷ Rexroth's words: "'Orchid Boat'—her [Li Ch'ing-chao's] sex, or specifically vulva." *Love and the Turning Year*, p. 125.