
EDITOR'S PAGE

Initiation

If a personal note may be permitted in a department normally reserved for the editorial "we", I will begin by recalling the year 1932, exactly a half-century before the publication date of this issue. What was known as the "Shanghai War" broke out on the 28th of January in that year—one of many local "incidents" that eventually led to Japan's full-scale invasion of China. For a while fighting had disrupted rail traffic to and from the port city. I was forced to prolong my winter holidays at home until I managed to take a steamer up the Yangtze River to Nanking, where I caught a train the next day to return to college in the north.

During my layover in Nanking I whiled away impatient hours thumbing through some books found in the home of the family friend with whom I spent the night. One of these was Chi-chen Wang's translation of *Hung-lou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) published in New York—in those days a foreign-language volume by a Chinese author was a rarity; another, the popular novel *T'i-hsiao yin-yüan* (*Fate in Tears and Laughter*), just out in book form following its hugely successful newspaper serialization.

My host, an American-educated professional man of my father's generation, happened to be "between jobs" at the time. Musing about various possibilities of gainful employment, he eyed the two books in question and thought out loud: "If this fellow Wang can do it, why can't I? . . . And what a whopping tale Chang Hen-shui's would make in English!" Little did I suspect then that one day I would play a part in bringing Prof. Wang and the best-selling "tear-jerker" together between the covers of an academic journal, even though not directly linked as translator and the work translated.

A Broad "Middlebrow"

The idea of a Special Issue of *Renditions* devoted to a segment of popular literature to be called "Middlebrow Fiction" was hatched *circa* 1977—one is never too sure about more recent dates—between Stephen Soong and two of our advisers, Mr. L. Z. Yuan and Prof. Liu Ts'un-yan. The term was meant to apply to traditional-style novels a cut or two below the very great, produced largely in the late-Ch'ing and early-Republican eras (roughly late 19th century and early 20th century), but by no means limited to that period.

Among the first contributors enlisted was my old friend C. C. Wang, who generously made available to us his translations from *Hsing-shih yin-yüan* (*Romance to Awaken the World*, retitled in English *Marriage as Retribution*). An early Ch'ing (18th century) work of realistic power, its significance was comparatively recently recognized. Prof. C. T. Hsia, who has brought new insights into the study of classic and modern Chinese fiction, here probes into the quintessential sentimentalism of Hsü Chen-ya's *Yü-li hun* (*Jade Pear Spirit*), prototype of the "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School" of fiction that flourished well into the 1920s. Eileen Chang, a much-admired writer in her own right, has been known to be at work on an English

version of *Hai-shang hua lieh-chuan* (*The Flowers of Shanghai*, here rendered *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*), a novel famous for its employment of the Soochow dialect. She gives the reader a tantalizing glimpse into the demi-monde of a bygone day that is sure to arouse his curiosity for more.

However, it was not until Liu Ts'un-yan accepted our invitation to be Guest Editor that the project began to gather steam. With his encyclopedic knowledge of Chinese literature and allied arts, Prof. Liu has contributed a long introductory essay providing an overview of Chinese middlebrow fiction as well as valuable background information on each of the subjects dealt with in this anthology. He also helped round out the compilation with translations by a number of his colleagues and students at the Australian National University.

Seeking and Encountering

By now readers of *Renditions* are familiar with the seemingly unconscionable time-lag between our semiannual issues. In fact, "Middlebrow Fiction", a double issue, has been five years or more in the making. This is only partly due to staff limitations, but mainly because some of the pieces we wanted to include were, as the Chinese aptly put it, "only to be encountered but not to be sought" 可遇而不可求.

It is in the nature of a journal of translation that we not only talk about a work but give our readers a taste of the real thing—in this case, excerpts from the novels discussed. Besides *Marriage in Retribution* and *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* already mentioned, this issue presents several chapters each from Tseng P'u's roman à clef *Nieh-hai hua* (*A Flower in a Sinful Sea*) and Chang Hen-shui's *Fate in Tears and Laughter*. These works and others of the genre are beginning to engage the interest of Western scholars, though little or nothing of their texts is as yet available in English.

The translations in this issue are supplemented with introductory notes, contemporary illustrations, and critical essays often themselves embodying relevant translations. This is especially true of Stephen Cheng's analysis of the structure and techniques of *Hai-shang hua*, bringing to bear the apparatus of Western literary criticism on a work that is peculiarly Chinese.

We are grateful to the distinguished literary journalist H. P. Tseng for his memoir on how his father, under the pseudonym "The Sick Man of East Asia", came to write *Nieh-hai hua*, and on the receptions accorded this novel of historical design and patriotic theme. Mr. Tseng's account is adapted here from a preface he wrote for the Chinese edition of Peter Li's study of Tseng P'u, the first to be undertaken in English. Part of Prof. Li's dissertation was to have been incorporated into this issue; regrettably, we had to forego the opportunity because his own book had beaten us to print. We are fortunate, however, in holding on to another piece of original research which had been in our hands for years: Perry Link's 1973 interview with the last surviving popular writer from the turn of the century, the nonagenarian Pao T'ien-hsiao.

Late Blooming Flowers

If one were to look for any unity of subject matter or theme in this collection,

it could readily be found in the concubines, the courtesans, and the sing-song girls that cavort through its pages. But a broader canvas is also held up to our view, of ordinary men and women, scholars and officials, the rich and the poor, the good and the evil, and the manners and customs that they followed. Written in the China of yesteryear with complete unawareness of any future or foreign scrutiny, in language and plot to appeal to a growing audience that hungered for entertainment, this literature merits attention as social history. It also provides us with more than a few pages of rollicking good read.

In assembling the contents of this Special Issue, a three-way correspondence and circulating of manuscripts was carried on over a period of time among Canberra, Hong Kong, and the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., with all its attendant editorial consultations, queries, and revisions. It is putting together a magazine the hard way, in these days of computer editing and satellite transmission!

Thanks are due Rafe de Crespigny, Colin Modini, and Sally Borthwick, for their timely contributions under the aegis of our Guest Editor; and especially to John Minford, who reviewed and embellished the entire manuscript under Stephen Soong's guidance. As always, credit must go to the loyal staff at the Research Centre for Translation of the Institute of Chinese Studies, CUHK, who pulled all the threads together and produced the final product.

Envoi

My own experience in helping to edit "Middlebrow Fiction" is not unlike what had gone on before, beginning ten years ago when I first visited the Chinese University of Hong Kong and took a hand in launching *Renditions*. (I remember, not inappropriately, that one of my many pleasurable moments on that beautiful campus was returning to my apartment after a day's wrestling with the proofs, only to shed all pretense to sophistication and fall a willing victim to the winsome images of Feng-hsi and Hsiu-ku—this time visualized for a vast new audience in a television production of *Tears and Laughter*, transmitted in Cantonese via Hong Kong's Jade Channel.)

After three years on the scene, I returned to retirement in the U.S. with the somewhat elusive title of Editor-at-Large, and *Renditions* still very much with me.

Today, the journal, with its offshoot *Renditions Books*, may be said to have carved out a small niche in the world of Chinese studies. This was in fact what we had set out to accomplish in 1972, neither more nor less. It has been said that any magazine reflects the idiosyncracies of its editor. Insofar as this applies to my role in the collective job of editing *Renditions*, it is time, I think, that I put further distance between ourselves—thus putting a stop, too, to the wear and tear of logistics. Beginning with the next issue, I shall no longer be an active participant in this worthy enterprise, leaving it confidently in younger and firmer hands.

But still, to me, it will be a case of *ou-tuan ssu-lien* 藕斷絲連—"though the lotus-root be severed, its skein of silk yet binds."