TAKING STOCK

It may be presumptuous to offer our experience in editing a Chinese-English translation magazine on basis of only four issues published. But the first four issues of *Renditions*, plus the necessary pre-publication work, have spanned a period of more than two years, enough time for us to have gained some idea of the "linguistic, practical, manpower and consumption aspects" of the work of translating from Chinese into English.

Nature, scope & frequency

From the beginning, *Renditions* was conceived as a magazine to serve the following purposes: (1) To make Chinese writings available to Western readers in translation; (2) to provide some insights into Chinese life and thought; and (3) to discuss and exemplify the art of translation.

According to a prospectus prepared at the time the magazine was first proposed, a sister journal may be published in time, devoted to translations from English into Chinese. Since C-E translators are not always equally adept at E-C work, and vice versa, a separate staff and a different group of contributors would probably be required to put out such a companion publication. And that time, we decided, was not yet.

It was a reasonable decision—to concentrate for the time being on English as the target language. But we had some misgivings about it initially, fearing that the public might thus be led to think that we were overly fond of English as a medium of expression. Our doubts were quickly allayed when one of the first Chinese newspapers articles that greeted the Inaugural Issue of *Renditions* was headed: "Breaking the Cultural Imbalance". This review pointed to the heretofore heavy incidence among Chinese-language publications of translations from the English and hailed the new magazine as a vehicle for "exporting Chinese culture", one that might do much to "redress the imbalance" in the existing East-West cultural interflow.

What about the scope and coverage within the Chinese-to-English limits? On this the thinking was not so clear. For instance, I personally recalled an American publication named *Living Age* which enjoyed a limited success in the '30's; it was entirely translated from foreign-language sources, but its contents ran to current events and opinion. In our prospectus, we mentioned a few other possible models: including *T'ien Hsia*, a journal of high quality published in Shanghai before the War, and distinguished British and American periodicals like *Encounter*, *Horizon*, and the stimulating but short-lived reprint magazine *Intellectual Digest*. All these suggested a general coverage and topical orientation, touching upon the social sciences as well as humanities. Could we afford to be so timely and so broad in terms of Chinese materials? We had our answer even before the first issue was off the drawing boards: *Renditions* had settled, naturally and definitely, into a literary mold. This was born of necessity as much as anything else.

Limited resources, human and material, also dictated the frequency, or rather infrequency of publication. Ideally, a periodical even of academic sponsorship should be a quarterly to sustain reader interest. In practice, however, more than once over the past two years or so we had reason to be thankful for having taken the prudent course and

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not attempted any more than two issues a year.

"Pulling in copy"

The question is often asked of us: Why do you print such and such a piece in *Renditions*? The answer, at its most basic, paraphrases that of Hillary when asked about mountain-climbing—"Because it's there!" The fact that we have in hand a publishable, or half-way publishable English manuscript is all-important. Whatever grandiose plans the editors may have, however anxious we may be to introduce some piece of deathless prose, it avails us nought if the thing is not already in English. We are not supposed to translate everything ourselves even if we had the capacity for it, nor could we assign or "commission" translations with any assurance of a prompt and adequate supply.

But an editor needs material to fill his pages—he must be able to "pull in copy" (拉稿), as the shop-talk has it. In the beginning we wrote numerous letters soliciting manuscripts, starting from personal acquaintances, and following up leads supplied by friends. Sometimes we drew a blank, but often the response was encouraging. Even more heartening was the fact that unsolicited contributions started coming in almost from the time the Inaugural Issue reached the hands of readers.

What, then, are the criteria for acceptance or rejection? Actually we set our sights a bit higher than any old piece so long as it is in English. Even not counting occasional Special Issues, we like to have some "relevance" or thematic arrangement in the contents of each issue. We also aim at what in magazine-editing is known as a good "mix". We may receive in the mails an excellent translation, but on a subject that does not quite fit into our current editorial scheme. So we hang on to it in the hope that we can work it in at some future date. On the other hand, we may receive indifferent renditions of just what we needed to round out an issue or to provide proper editorial balance. In that case, we work our heads off to make it eventually publishable. In either case, we do not reject out of hand; we request time for "due consideration" and for circulating the mss. among our "panel of readers". This, in truth, is standard practice, and a time-consuming one. It explains why, in addition to the time-lag normal with a magazine that appears twice a year, a would-be *Renditions* contributor sometimes faces a long wait from submission to acceptance, and from acceptance to publication.

To list the factors that influence acceptance or rejection, especially for the benefit of our younger contributors:

1. The original material you choose to translate must be worthwhile. Like a writer choosing the right subject, this is partly luck and partly based on instinct or assiduous study of what has already been published.
2. In a semiannual like *Renditions* space is naturally at a premium. We try to cover various literary forms, periods and authors. We cannot afford to give too much exposure to one author, whatever his intrinsic worth, nor could we repeatedly carry the work of the same translator.
3. As implied before, editors do not mind a piece of translation that falls short of the best standard. But they are disappointed, and annoyed, with careless mistakes and other signs that the translator has not done his or her best in the preliminary go-around. The sins could include misreading obviously easy passages in the original text and committing errors that could have been avoided by consulting a dictionary or a qualified informant. For those of our contributors who are students, and who submit some of their academic exercises for consideration, we devoutly wish that they will have had their manuscripts reviewed in advance and, where necessary, corrected by their professors.
4. Finally, there is always the editors' errors of judgment to contend with. We have proved ourselves capable of sins of commission and omission in the comparatively short span of our existence. We have turned away some worthwhile contributions, and have printed things on which we now have second thoughts.

Polishing and revision

"Every writer loves his own writing best," according to a familiar contemporary Chinese saying. So does every translator love his own translation. Those who would tamper with his copy risk insulting his person if not doing injury to his text. Still, translations, like human nature, are infinitely improvable. There is hardly a piece published in *Renditions*—including those contributed by the more experienced hands—that has not been edited or revised in one degree or another. From the substitution of a mere word here and there to the more extensive revisions and corrections of errors, the process begins with a first quick reading, goes on to checking against the original text, and the minimum necessary amount of "doctoring" or "polishing" to bring it up to the translator's overall excellence and our own admittedly arbitrary standard of acceptability. It is a most time-consuming

and physically and mentally exhausting task, generally performed by more than one person and then given to still another for a final review. The final editor often finds himself turning Janus-like from the original copy to the revised copy, to the Chinese text, and perhaps to some existing translation or other—all in the interest of groping for the "right" word or phrase.

Sometimes this process is carried into the proofreading stage and, in our inexperience, we would forget or not find the time, to refer back to the contributor. Understandably, he will be miffed when he sees the printed version in which not every word is his very own, whether the changes represent an improvement or otherwise. As our operating procedure improves, we now take care to allow time to send any substantive revisions back to the translator for his approval or counter-revision. Where opinions differ, the editors will defer to the translators' judgment if the piece is to be printed at all.

In the case of translations published in *Renditions* that have undergone extensive editorial revisions, we have been asked whether it might not be more accurate to have the piece appear over the joint signatures of the translator and the editor. This is a serious point, one that bears on the questions of due credit and of responsibility. We have pondered on it, and are glad to say that up to now we have not felt it necessary to resort to a joint by-line. This is because what we have done to any manuscript has not gone beyond the limits of editing and revising into the area of what may properly be regarded as collaborative translating. And we would not be considering publishing, let alone editing and revising, unless we are convinced that it is a basically sound piece of translation as submitted.

Broadly speaking, every finished piece of translation is a kind of cooperative effort, even though it may bear the name of a single translator. The conscientious translator will have consulted a number of helpers, informants and advisers along the way, and in addition accepted the suggestions and revisions tendered by his editors too. It is a rare "bilingual" Chinese whose English cannot stand improvement by a qualified native English-writer. By the same token, no Western scholar, however confident of his Chinese, should risk publishing his translation without having consulted a knowledgeable native Chinese-speaker or two, especially when it comes to the idiomatic use of the language.

Translations and translations

We have quoted Y. R. Chao's cryptic remark: "There are translations and translations". Though Prof. Chao used it to introduce one of his half-humorous conundrums, to me this is a profound statement illustrative of the pluralism that is inherent in the art of rendering one language into another. For any piece of literary writing there could be three or four or more equally acceptable translations. There are, to be sure, differences from one version to another, and varying degrees of excellence or deficiency as the case may be. But it is in the nature of translation to be tentative and not final. Gregory Rabassa, a well-known tiller of linguistic fields other than Chinese and English, has confessed that he has never been satisfied with the "final" version of a translation he has done. A piece of creative writing may have a final form, he said, "such is not possible with a translation, even when it is the work of a single translator." That is why we have chosen to give our magazine the rather flexible name "Renditions".

Another theorist in translation, George Steiner, has pointed out in his new book that a classic, even within one's own tongue, is subject to different interpretations at different times. There are translations and translations—of the *Shih Ching*, of Laotzu and Chuangtzu, of the glorious T'ang poems (new versions of which are constantly being submitted to us from various quarters, both Chinese and Western). In this issue we publish a "new" rendition of Po Chü-i's *Ch'ang hên kê* ("The Song of Enduring Woe"), fashioned by the late Jesuit priest, John Turner, which represents yet another interpretation of this celebrated poem, a version that harks back to the lyrical eloquence of Victorian verse. Indeed, a study has been made comparing a half dozen or more English versions of *Ch'ang hên kê*. Someday we may be tempted to print them all side by side, in contrasting typefaces, or perhaps some other piece of classical or modern Chinese literature in multiple renditions.

"Poetry suffers. . . . "

While we are on poetry, it is easily the largest group of unsolicited contributions received at *Renditions*. The reason is not far to seek. A

Chinese poem is usually a matter of a few dozen characters, at most a few hundred, arranged in neat and symmetrical lines. Faced with the scanty wordage, the beautiful rhetoric and seemingly unabstruse meaning, the temptation is great to try one's hand at putting the thing into English. It could be done without the toil and sweat required to plough through acres of prose verbiage in, say, Chinese fiction.

The trouble is, if poetry looks easy by virtue of its limited wordage, it is also eye-catching, thus more vulnerable to criticism, especially when printed line-for-line alongside the original Chinese. To adapt the popular quip, poetry suffers in translation and the editor suffers with it. Of the brickbats that we receive, the greatest number have been aimed at our poetry translations.

In our experience, the dilemma of "free vs. literal translation" applies nowhere more acutely than in the attempt at rendering Chinese poetry into English. There are those translations that read and sound poetic in English, even if the translator might find it necessary to deviate somewhat from the original. There is nothing reprehensible in this approach—some call it a "translation" of cultures —and many highly regarded poet-translators have followed it. But "free translation" is no excuse for misreading the original or for taking off on one's own flight of fancy.

The opposite method of "literal translation" in poetry, substituting for each Chinese character an English word equivalent, understandably favored by native-Chinese translators, is also increasingly being adopted by our younger Western scholars. There is nothing wrong with this either, and it is liable to produce some effective modern verse. But what about the meanings between the lines, to which the Chinese poetry is so prone—have they been taken care of, and how? If the translator reveals, explicitly or implicitly, that he has missed or misinterpreted the point, then the result cannot be good translation—whatever its claims as poetry. Lesson: we have redoubled our efforts in checking our poetry contributions, not attempting to alter the prosody (which we leave to the translator) but concentrating on catching just plain mistakes.

A word about readership

Recently, there arrived in our office a small windfall in the form of a bulk order of 25 copies of *Renditions* No. 2 (Special Fiction Issue) from the University of Texas at Arlington, to be rush-delivered by air—no doubt some summer course in Chinese Lit. is assigning it as supplementary reading. In *Renditions* 4, in the Editor's Page, we explained briefly why it is difficult for us to increase the number of pages of our Chinese text in each issue. We will gladly do so, and make this more of a bilingual magazine, if we have evidence that the demand is backed up by subscription orders in large numbers from the many Western universities and colleges that offer programs in Chinese Studies.

After four issues, we feel that *Renditions* has served two functions that should justify its continued existence and growth: (1) It has provided more of the text and substance needed for use in university courses in Chinese Literature in Translation, Chinese Literary Criticism, and Comparative Literature. (2) It has provided a regular outlet to the increasing number of graduates from these courses who are itching to translate from the Chinese and who, understandably, would like to see themselves in print.

In endeavoring to serve the scholars, we like to think that we are at the same time readable and entertaining to the general reader. In this connection, we are heartened by a recent review in *The China Quarterly*, published from London and concerned largely with other disciplines, who welcomes us as a "new contribution to *belles lettres*". "A most attractive feature," the article continued, "is its catering both to those who are highly proficient in literary Chinese, and to those who are only slightly so or know no Chinese at all.... How pleasant to be reminded that Chinese can be fun."

The fun is shared on both sides of the editorial desk, and our own sentiments are better expressed by another reader, this time a lady in the State of Connecticut, U.S.A. After some flattering remarks about *Renditions* as a "delightful literary journal" that extended from its editorial contents to its "comfortable format", "nice paper" and "nice type", she added: "If you are enjoying editing it as much as I would, were I in your shoes, you are up to your knees in clover, in a world that gets weedier all the time."

—*G. K.*