

## Preface

The expression “borrowed place, borrowed time” is used so often to describe Hong Kong that it has almost become a cliché, and yet there is no denying the truth behind this pithy description. While it is difficult to describe briefly the heterogenous culture that is Hong Kong, one would have to admit that a thriving economy and an emphasis on material success are its most salient features. It is perhaps understandable that in a place where “roots” and the future have been banished from most people’s thoughts, a place which focuses firmly on the here and now, materialistic considerations reign supreme. Though over the past three decades there have been valiant attempts, mostly in the form of literary magazines and newspapers, by individuals and publishers to thrust the claims of literature to the forefront, all these have met with minimal success.

And yet in the last few years “Hong Kong literature” has suddenly become a hot topic locally. Perhaps it is typical of Hong Kong that this outburst of interest is a direct result of a “historical factor”—Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule in 1997. The “borrowed place” is suddenly faced with a future, one which may be drastically different from its present condition. The re-evaluation of its political circumstances has led to an overall re-evaluation of every aspect of life in the territory, and the discussions on Hong Kong literature can be considered part and parcel of this general process.

Yet despite continual debates over critical approaches, the quality of local writing, questions such as “Is he or she a ‘Hong Kong writer?’” and even the precise definition of “Hong Kong literature”, no consensus has been reached among scholars and writers. While we may all agree that in terms of quantity a literary boom is taking place in Hong Kong, it is also true that the quality of these writings does not merit unmitigated approval. Popular writing which has a strong following may not boast much literary merit—a universal truth—but somehow Hong Kong writers seem to be just that little bit more sensitive about their literary reputations than their counterparts in other countries. The few widely-acclaimed writers have struggled long and hard in their personal quests for literary fulfilment. Literature, ultimately, is a highly personal pursuit, and particularly so in the environment of Hong Kong.

Although the quality of Hong Kong writing is uneven, and although there is as yet no firm definition of what constitutes “Hong Kong literature”, if one starts looking at the corpus of writing available one is bound to be struck by its sheer

richness and diversity—qualities which reflect the heterogenous culture of the territory. In publishing a special *Renditions* issue on Hong Kong, our intention is to reflect this richness and diversity rather than to produce a definitive volume on Hong Kong literature. The latter task will have to wait until clearer ideas about the territory's literary output emerge from the continuing debates. And even then controversy will not be easily avoided.

The idea for a special issue on Hong Kong was conceived by Professor John Minford in 1986, when he was still in Hong Kong. Preliminary research for the issue started in the same year, and before his departure for New Zealand in December, 1986, Professor Minford had gathered a wealth of materials, some of which now constitutes the first two sections of this issue. However, since this is an area relatively unknown to both sinologists and translators, it has taken us another two years to bring the idea to fruition.

As our aim is to provide a general introduction to Hong Kong culture, past and present, we have devoted the first section of this volume to folklore and traditional songs popular in Hong Kong as well as southern China, a reminder of the strong cultural link between the territory and the mainland. This link is also obvious in the second section, which consists of prose and poems by writers from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s, a period when the local literary scene was dominated by mainland writers. The four sections that follow consist of the literary output of local writers from the early 1950s to the present, while section VII, with the articles on cinema, art and Westerners' perceptions of Chinese people, will hopefully help to give a more rounded picture of the territory. We have included in the last section, which deals with Hong Kong's response to 1997, reportage written by a mainland Chinese writer so that there will be a counterpoint to the opinions expressed by local writers.

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of people whose help and encouragement have made this issue possible: Sir David Wilson, Governor of Hong Kong, for writing the Foreword; Professor Liu Ts'un-yan, Professor C. T. Hsia, Mr T. C. Lai and other members of our Advisory and Editorial Committees for their invaluable suggestions; Yim Chi-hung and Wong Leung-wo, graduate students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, for spending two summers on the preliminary research for this issue; Jon Solomon for his help in proof-reading and production; and our translators for answering our calls for help with such readiness and enthusiasm. But I owe my deepest gratitude to members of the Research Centre for Translation, whose faith in and devotion to *Renditions* have helped us meet seemingly impossible deadlines, and whose belief in perfectability has been the corner-stone of this magazine's quality. Because of their efforts, we have not only succeeded in bringing to our readers the first anthology of Hong Kong writing, we have also caught up with our publication schedule.

Over the last few decades, Hong Kong has been consistently referred to as a "cultural desert". Perhaps the time is now ripe to assert that the territory boasts as many cultural activities as any other Chinese society, and that includes literary creation. In our selection of writings for this issue, diversity has been a major consideration. Even so, the actual range of literature we would have liked to include

far exceeds our ability to accommodate it. We regret in particular the absence of works by the poet Wen Jianlou 溫健騷, the martial-arts fiction of Jin Yong 金庸 and the writings of the early literati such as are collected in the *Songtai qiuchang* 宋台秋唱. But we hope that this special issue will suffice as a general introduction to Hong Kong writing, and will arouse the interest of scholars and general readers alike. Even if Hong Kong is a cultural desert, it is one dotted with a myriad oases.

For those who remain unconvinced, I would like to offer the following quotation from "A House of Silence", a poem by Thomas Hardy:

*"But I see nobody there,—  
Nobody moves about the green,  
Or wanders the heavy trees between."  
—Ah, that's because you do not bear  
The visioning powers of souls who dare  
To pierce the material screen."*

Or, better still, start reading the writings in this special issue.

—E. H.

### A Note on Romanization

With the exception of persons who are well-known by their English names or by a different system of romanization, all personal names are romanized according to the *pinyin* system. All place names in Hong Kong are romanized or translated according to the local system.