

How It All Began

George Kao

is founding Editor of *Renditions*, of which he remained Editor-at-Large until 1982. He is also a generous sponsor of the journal's projects.



The Kaos and the Soongs, Ma On Shan in background, 1974

I have written about 'The *Renditions* Experience' on at least three occasions before this. The first time was in 1974, at the invitation of the Hong Kong Translation Society. I had the cheek to talk on the subject on the basis of only one issue published. My second attempt was in the form of a paper delivered at a symposium in Kowloon attended by a number of academic lights from Taiwan, the US, and Hong Kong. This time I spoke with all of four issues of *Renditions* under my belt. Again, in 1976, after I left Hong Kong Stephen Soong put together some of my jottings in an article for the *Chinese University Bulletin*. By then, *Renditions* No. 6, the Special Art Issue, had been in the works and we could speak with a degree of confidence about our collective 'experience'.

Today, thirty years and some sixty issues later, there is a rich store of experience that is worth chronicling. But it is not for me to do, who only started the ball rolling. I wish Stephen were around to tell of how he supported and sustained the magazine through its difficult early years, and how he became the hands-on Editor in 1982 after I had served for the last time as Editor-at-Large with the Middlebrow Fiction Issue. Also, if Stephen were with us, I'm sure he would join me in saluting Eva Hung, who has been editing this magazine these past two decades and now presides over its 30th anniversary. Indeed, Eva lives the *Renditions* experience.

But how did it all begin? I guess *that* remains for me to tell—from a rapidly fading memory.

In September 1972, when I reported for work at the CUHK Translation Centre, I had no idea what I was supposed to do. Nor, I suspect, did anyone else connected with this newly established unit of the Institute of Chinese Studies from the Vice-Chancellor on down. Installed in an elegant office above an inner court and goldfish pond, I was given a desk piled high with a book manuscript and asked if I would review it. This turned out to be a Chinese translation of a treatise on Chinese grammar written originally in English by the eminent linguist Y.R. Chao. A day or two into the manuscript convinced me that this was not the kind of work I was invited all the way from America to do or what the Centre should concern itself with. I felt I could serve the Centre best by doing something more in accord with its mission. I thought we could do something not attempted anywhere heretofore: publish a periodical devoted to English translations of Chinese literary writing past and present. This would provide reading which bilingual Hong Kong could use and the English-speaking world at large might appreciate.

The first meeting to discuss such an idea was very informal. Five of us gathered for tea at the apartment my wife and I occupied in University Residence No. 1. Half-way up the hill on the still virgin campus, we could look out the windows at cloud-shrouded Ma On Shan across the then spacious harbour. Present were Stephen C. Soong, Special Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor; Prof. Phillip Sun, Head of the Department of Translation;

T.C. Lai, Director of Extramural Studies (all four, including me, close neighbours in the same building); and Prof. Ma Meng, Head of the Department of Chinese at the University of Hong Kong across the sea.

There was surprisingly no dissent to my proposal, and discussion soon centred around many anticipated editorial and production problems, not least where to obtain the necessary funding. Then came a moment for christening the unborn magazine. I don't know when or from where came the brainwave, but I had always liked the musical connotation of the word 'Renditions'. I felt that translation of literature is a matter of interpretation, that there are at least two or more ways to go about recreating a given text in another language. The editor must understand that a line of poetry, for instance, evokes different responses in different breasts, and judge the translation on that basis. A practical reason for adopting *Renditions* was that there already existed other journals with the prosaic title 'Translation'.

That day we also agreed that the publication was to be a biannual—to come out twice yearly. This decision we would have reason to be thankful for in the years to come. For, though we had ample 'lead-time' between issues—to solicit and review manuscripts, and edit and prepare them for the press—somehow we always managed to run behind schedule. And there would be harried last-minute activity as if we were putting out a daily paper!

The inaugural issue, dated Autumn 1973, had few outside contributions. Each bit of copy for *Renditions* No. 1 was house-written, so to speak. As Editor, I translated two pieces. One was an amusing Chinese-language radio script by the same Y.R. Chao whom I felt I owed one. With Prof. Chao's approval, I rendered it into English under the title 'Where I Went Wrong in Matters of Language'. Imagine my chagrin when, some time after the magazine made its auspicious debut, I came across an *original* English article similarly titled and with essentially the same content! I've never found out whether Prof. Chao had written two versions of his linguistic misadventures, one in English and one in Chinese, or whether someone else had translated his English into Chinese which I, in turn, put back into English. My only consolation was that, upon

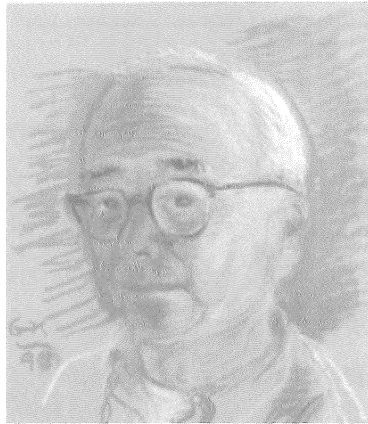
comparing the two English texts, I found that my 'virtual reality' (to borrow the current lingo) was fairly close to and quite as readable as the authentic article.

This is not to say that a literary work is something that can be translated back and forth without any loss as, I imagine, can be done with machine translation. In subsequent issues of *Renditions* we have tried invariably to publish original translations, if I may be permitted an oxymoron. We have introduced in these pages many a neophyte who has gone on to greater things in bilingualism; we have also been privileged to 'serialize' chapters or excerpts from manuscripts that would later become important books in the world of literary translation.

Another personal recollection from the early days related to the magazine's physical appearance. A friendly staffer at the Chinese University Press, seeing that I was fresh from the States, reminded me that here in Hong Kong one follows the British style in matters pertaining to usage and spelling—thus *colour* for *color*, and *civilization* rather than *civilisation*, etc. My own background, plus the fact that in those days most of our contributions came from American scholars of Chinese studies, counselled an eclectic approach. We simply let each translator use his own style in spelling and idiom and even in the transliteration of Chinese names. This was wrong, of course, and wiser and tidier editorial hands have since established a uniform style. However, I am glad to see the original *Renditions* masthead preserved to this day, with its familiar calligraphy 譯叢, and to find traces of the old typography and page-design still there.

In the more important question of content, I am of the belief that a magazine reflects the personality, even the idiosyncrasies, of its editor. Stephen Soong was our guardian angel from the beginning. He was in University administration at the time, but his first and last love was literature, poetry in particular. Daily after five he would cross the quad to come to my office and we would hash over the innumerable problems of the infant magazine. He was an editor in everything but name at the same time that he gave me much-needed advice on the housekeeping details associated with academic publishing. In 1982, he took over the editorial

helm at *Renditions* and immediately put his stamp on the issues following. Stephen and I were ably assisted by Diana Yue, whom I once half-jokingly referred to as being 'present at the creation'. Ms Yue's skilled hand was evident in the more difficult translations in the earlier issues, as well as in the graphics for which we had won much praise from the start.



Self-portrait by George Kao,
1998.

Translation is often called a thankless job; if so, then editing a translation magazine is a challenging pursuit that is doubly thankless. Before he retired, Stephen had brought in John Minford, the noted translator of the last forty chapters of *The Story of the Stone*, who served a distinguished but all-too-brief tour as Editor. (Both John and Diana Yue are now enjoying the tranquility of the academic groves.) In 1986, the burdens of editorship devolved onto the slender shoulders of Eva Hung. Together with Prof. David Pollard, first as co-editor and now Advisory Editor, she has made *Renditions* what it is today. Their joint performance—year in and year out, issue upon spectacular issue—is characterized by a scholarly depth and editorial savvy that encompasses the length and breadth of the Chinese literary landscape from the *Shi jing* to Gao Xingjian, from Hong Kong across the waters to Taiwan and the Mainland.

But that is the rest of the story, and I leave it to those closer to the current scene to tell. And to the magazine to speak for itself. ☒

George Kao