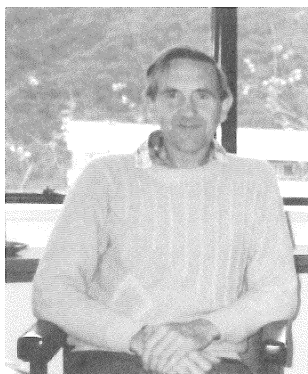


To Begin at the Beginning

David E. Pollard

Co-editor of *Renditions* from 1989 to 1997; Advisory Editor since 1998. He served as Professor of Chinese at London University (1979-1989) and Professor of Translation at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (1989-1997).



David Pollard at his *Renditions* office.

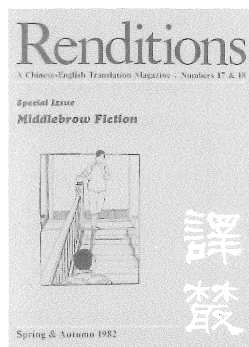
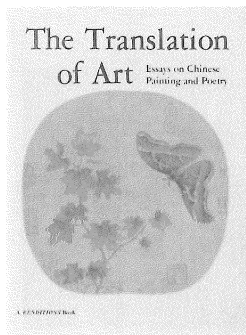
I take some pride in personally possessing a complete run of *Renditions*, right from its launch in 1973. What made me subscribe in those far-off days has now passed from my memory. It could not have been any personal connection, as I knew no one at the hub of the enterprise, had never been to the Chinese University, and had never taken an interest in translation as a thing in itself, or if you prefer, a *Ding an sich*. One factor that probably weighed in the balance was that it offered a very good bargain for any magazine, at only five pounds for a three-year subscription, yet a market analyst of the time might not have marked me down as the most likely kind of customer if she or he had taken as her or his brief the introductory words of Choh-ming Li, then Vice-Chancellor of CUHK. He wrote that *Renditions* was 'designed for the general reader with an educated curiosity about Chinese culture'. The 'educated curiosity' bit would not have been an obstacle, as I was well embarked on an education,

and was young enough to have curiosity. The sticking point would have been the 'general reader' category, as I was, by virtue of having been a lecturer in Chinese for ten years, clearly a professional. In reality, however, the description of general reader would have fitted me very well, as I was truly in that position with respect to large tracts of Chinese culture, and forays into the great unknown or dimly perceived was what *Renditions* promised. Granted that magazine space would limit the individual articles to samples, yet sampling was just what was needed, and the medium of translation into English would make the sampling effortless. Its wide spread, far from making the magazine characterless, promised to be its chief virtue. So do I reconstruct my thoughts then.

If anything, the magazine exceeded expectations when it arrived. George Kao and Stephen Soong had gone to some trouble to line up a lot of big guns in Chinese studies to give it a good send-off. To refresh my memory, I got out the first half dozen issues again, but that turned out to be a tactical error, for I found myself re-reading contributions, instead of just looking at titles. If I had persisted, this little essay would have missed its deadline. To be sure, those prime movers, Kao and Soong, had a good deal going for them, in that there was a big backlog of things waiting, as it were, to see the light of day in English. Given first billing in No. 1, for example, was 'Yen Fu on Translation', and that was followed by Burton Watson's 'Two Imperial Ladies of Han', which cunningly anticipated the interest in what became known, unattractively, as Gender Studies.



From left: Dorothy Birch, Janice Wickeri, David Pollard, Cyril Birch, Eva Hung, Frederick Tsai, George Kao and Douglas Lancashire, 1992.



The content mix was quite broad to begin with, in the sense that freestanding discursive articles were accommodated that might have had, and sometimes had had, a home elsewhere in other kinds of journals. The proportion of such articles to actual translations was much higher in the first stage of *Renditions* than it became latterly, when the preference shifted to commentary attached to translations. If the purpose of their inclusion was to enhance the academic standing of the magazine, no doubt they helped, but more effective in that regard was the succession of special issues, which started with No. 6, on Chinese art. Several of those have been truly ground-breaking. One I particularly remember was Middlebrow Fiction (Nos. 17 & 18), guest-edited by Liu Ts'un-yan. That was an eye-opener for people like me who had been prisoners of scholarly histories of Chinese literature. Fortuitously, 'middlebrow' tied in with the level aimed at by *Renditions*. Though the brow was sometimes unconsciously raised and lowered, the median has been pretty well kept to, by which I mean that the interests of the reader have always been put first, by opening the books and removing as many barriers to appreciation and understanding as possible, instead of heaping up scholarly debris.

To revert to my personal history, the first translations I did for *Renditions* were published in 1986, with No. 26. Only three years after that I found myself co-editing the magazine with Eva Hung, a speedy transition that I never quite understood myself. Could the reason for that honour have been that I was by then the last surviving original subscriber? As that seems

the most satisfying explanation, I am not going to have the records checked in case they disprove it. The upshot, anyway, was that I subsequently did quite a few more translations, to fill in gaps in issues. Eva Hung continued to produce ideas and do most of the real work, while I practised my eighteenth-century English prose. Sadly, the greatest master of stately English prose, John Dryden, was beyond my reach as a model, and Chinese writing gave little scope to emulate the style of the master of the light touch, P.G. Wodehouse. Happy days, nevertheless.

Now I am secure in retirement I can look back contentedly at work done at *Renditions* in the past, and benignly at work being done there in the present. The backlog of Chinese material waiting to be translated has of course greatly diminished in the thirty years of the magazine's operation, and the conspicuous heights have been scaled. But people have not stopped writing in Chinese, nor have the riches of the heritage by any means been exhausted. Equally positive, the top-of-the-league prestige of *Renditions* still persuades old hands to rally round as occasion demands, and encourages newcomers to submit their finds and experiments. There is no inherent reason why the jewel first cut by Kao and Soong, and later polished by other hands, should not continue to glitter. ☒

