

Renditions at Thirty

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I began reviewing books in the *South China Morning Post* in the summer of 1986 and must have first reviewed a copy of *Renditions* not long after. Now that I'm living in Taipei it's mostly their remarkable book-length translations that come my way, for review in *Taipei Times*. But in both these categories there's usually one thing in common—the name of Eva Hung. By any account she appears the presiding deity of the entire enterprise.

What strikes me most forcibly about Eva's work are two things—unflagging energy and acute critical insight. The former is attested to by the sheer number of *Renditions* publications, but the latter is open to more detailed analysis.

A text taken almost at random that will serve as a typical example is her introduction to the 2001 *Renditions* Paperback publication *City Women*. This is a collection of short stories by some of Taiwan's best-known female writers. But Eva's introduction is quite as striking as anything the distinguished contributors have to offer.

Take this passage as an example, displaying as it does a remarkable insight into Western literary and social history. 'Most male modernist writers of the early twentieth century painted a dark picture of the modern metropolis—as an insatiable monster sucking up resources, or an ugly landscape in contrast to the rural idyll, or the gutter of poverty and overcrowding. The women writers, however, responded positively to the numerous opportunities and new patterns of life that the big cities offered them.'

I have read many analyses of modernism in the arts, but never anywhere before have I seen this exceptionally important point made.

Soon after follows another passage showing an equal perceptiveness, this time of Taiwan's extraordinary, but not always smooth, modern development. Commenting on a short story from 1989 that focuses on a Taipei housewife's first encounter with quick-profit stock exchange trading, she writes, 'A decade on, after the story's topicality has receded, its focus becomes crystal clear. It is about the joys and sorrows of an ordinary woman trapped in a prescribed role who, for a brief moment, glimpsed unimaginable possibilities through an open door, only to have that door shut in her face again.'

Not only, in other words, does Eva Hung show herself to be abreast of current academic concerns on, amongst other things, feminist issues; she also contributes to its debates in cogent, forceful and—most important of all—jargon-free fashion.

The most glittering story in this particular collection is one by Zhu Tianwen 朱天文 called '*Fin de Siècle Splendour*' 世紀末的華麗. It resonates with phrases evoking the intensely fashionable world of a certain kind of professional Taipei woman—'material girls', every one of whom will savour 'powdered cassia in ... her cappuccino', 'sand-washed silk', and 'cutwork rayon creating the image of the flying devas of the Duanhuang cave paintings'. The entire story is in English a *tour de force*, scintillating and perfumed, at one and the same time exotic and verbally exact.

'Wonderful!' you exclaim, as you flick back through the pages. 'What a story! What a translation!' And

almost by accident you open the story again at its title page, and there you notice the terse but significant credit—'Translated by Eva Hung'.

So, many congratulations to *Renditions* on its 30th birthday! It has undertaken an enterprise that elsewhere often suffers from dry academic fustiness, but in the hands of *Renditions* is almost always fresh, sparkling and new. The task it has embarked on—the translation of the modern literature of the world's oldest and, in very many epochs, most inventive and urbane civilization—is prodigious indeed. In the field of literary endeavour, few things could be more important than that. ☒

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