

Joining the Party

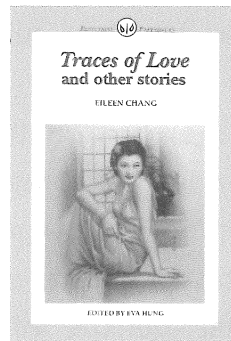
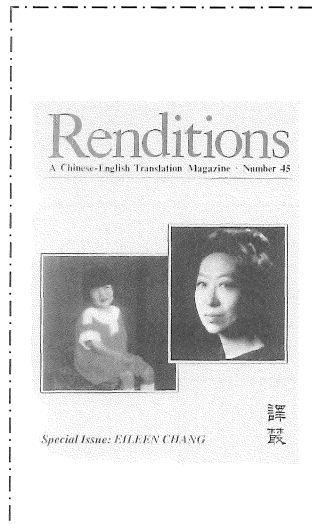
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Experienced translators would know that the art of translation is not simply a matter of finding substitutions between languages. Individual words embody cultural information intended, despite the author's intention or control. Obviously, translators proceed with faith in the communicability of ideas between cultures and human experiences that make such endeavours worthwhile.

In the American college where I teach undergraduate courses in Chinese literature in translation, students, especially students of Chinese descent, often come to the course with preconceived ideas of China's exotic uniqueness. They seek out differences in their readings. There is a belief that if one manages to put a finger on difference, one can get a handle on the culture itself. It is always easier to spot differences than to think about the subtleties of sameness. After all concepts of difference are what fuel the inferiority or superiority complexes on both sides of literary reception that affirm our nationalist sentiments. Difference is a foundation of politics.

I assigned Eileen Chang's story, 'Great Felicity', in my course this semester. The story evoked tremendous sympathetic outrage from my students toward the masochistic female oppressiveness that Chang excels in portraying. My students are able to immediately identify the patriarchal structure that



imprisons the protagonist, the tragic flaws in the characters and the absurdity of human nature. From their personal experiences or observations, my students recognize the still pervasive female behaviour in today's society on the other side of the hemisphere, in another city. It is all old medicine in a different crock. Translatability of experiences is a result of empathetic correspondences between readers and writers. This empathy is, in turn, a result of sameness.

Renditions provides an important affirmation of sameness in its mission in translation. Translation is not really about promoting cultural understanding. What is so difficult to 'understand' about another culture? There is nothing mysterious about injustice and suffering that result from social, economic and political oppressions, pleasures from material possession and inspiration from sensual stimuli. But it is easier not to understand, as some of my students might defensively 'hate' a work, proclaiming it unreadable, when actually they had failed to do their reading assignment. Laziness substitutes for 'cultural differences'. We avoid our responsibilities toward others in the name of not being able to understand them.

If writers aim to articulate the human condition—social, political or psychological—translators provide a kind of dynamic chorus of 'me too'! They are messengers of this garrulous affirmation of sameness. Translation is participation in consensus and a way of joining the human party. In our dangerous world today when political leaders speak lightly of decimating tens of thousands of lives and when incidents of genocide and national chauvinism

are on the rise, to affirm affinity and to preach empathy towards others are ever more urgent. We celebrate translators because they are a faithful and joyous crowd and we celebrate *Renditions* as a venue for this faithfulness. ☒



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