

Returning to Hong Kong

Cyril Birch

is Emeritus Professor at the University of California at Berkeley and served as *Renditions* Fellow in 1991-92. He has been contributing to *Renditions* since 1974.



Cyril Birch at his *Renditions* office, 1991.

More than any other place, more even than the Lancashire hometown I left in the middle of the Second World War, mention of Hong Kong has provoked nostalgia in me for more than fifty years. This was one reason for the delight with which I accepted the honour of appointment as *Renditions* Fellow for 1991-92.

I don't think it is just a question of personal experience, the fact that on sabbatical in 1950 I had my first taste of life in a Chinese community. It has more to do with the vibrancy of Hong Kong itself, the friendliness of a place 'as big as an egg' (*gaidan gam dai*), the bustle and zest of its crowds and the quiet of gardens with geckos and butterflies, the beauty and drama of harbour-front skylines and the flowing shuttle of ferries and junks, sampans and container leviathans. All these, and the swift and endless processes of change in every dimension, have meant with each subsequent return at once a new sense of wonder and a renewed surge of old memories.

Memories I particularly cherish revolve around Göran Malmqvist, my immediate predecessor as Fellow. He would inevitably have been very much in our minds when my wife and I returned to take up residence in Shatin, for the monastery on Tao Fong Shan, the local peak, was the scene of his wedding to Ningzu 寧祖, on an autumn day in 1950. Ningzu, 'little sister' *Xiaomei*, fresh out of Sichuan, seemed the least sophisticated country lass imaginable, but within a week of arrival in Hong Kong she had (with great glee) had her hair permed and was already demonstrating her amazing facility in both Swedish and English. A Swedish pastor even taller than Göran himself conducted the wedding service against a background of Buddhist bells and gongs. Harry Simon was best man, and I had the honour of carrying a very large wedding cake up a great many extraordinarily steep steps.

A good deal of the bucolic world of Lantau, where the Malmqvists spent their honeymoon, has disappeared. No longer does the handful of passengers descend from the ferry moored in Silvermine Bay to be rowed, with its complement of chickens, geese and piglets, to within a narrow gangplank's distance of the beach: nowadays, alas, the stream of humanity exits a hovercraft on to a spanking new concrete pier.

When George Kao and others founded *Renditions* in 1973 it seemed the most natural development imaginable for the cultural entrepôt that flourished under the protective canopy of all that trade and finance. In the thirty years since, with Eva Hung so ably forwarding the enterprise, *Renditions* has done invaluable service to the cause of bringing Chinese literature, contemporary and classical, within the reach of the English-reading public: for myself, I know that the opportunity to put six scenes of *Peony Pavilion* into print in this distinguished journal certainly strengthened my resolve to forge ahead with a complete translation.

My self-imposed assignment for the period of the Fellowship was to read Ming plays to round off my book *Scenes for Mandarins*. Dorothy and I were lodged in a guest apartment of Shaw College, and I couldn't have asked for a happier setting for a strenuous course of reading. From our balcony we looked out over Tolo Harbour, Shatin off to the right and Taipo to the left. In the immediate foreground a constant procession of



A temple in Tai Po Market.

villagers climbed up and down scores of steps that led to the Kowloon-Canton railroad line. At the centre of their village, below us to the left, was a family temple which at New Year's crackled for days on end with its protective barrage of fireworks.

We were in a building the plaster of whose walls had barely dried, and in six years' time the local police would wear different uniforms. Filipina maids gossiping on their afternoons off had already replaced white-flannelled cricketers in front of the Hong Kong Club in Statue Square. Still and all, memories of Hong Kong over a span of fifty years were given a new lease of life by the grace of my *Renditions* Fellowship. Thank you, Eva and David. ☒

CB inch