

# Ma Chih-yuan's "Autumn Thoughts"

Translated by Kenneth P. H. Ho

*In the history of the development of Yuan ch'ü, Ma Chih-yuan (A.D. 1250-1321), the most celebrated writer of lyrical songs, had to his credit more than a hundred hsiao-ling (小令 individual songs) and some twenty t'ao-shu (套數 song sequences). The writing of lyrical songs, or san-ch'ü (散曲), as it is traditionally called, required that each song or song sequence be governed by a single rhyme, and though songs in each sequence can be different in form and tune, they should belong to the same tonality, or mode, in the musical system. This technical mastery, as well as a spacious imagination and a feeling of serene contemplation, marks the san-ch'ü of Ma Chih-yuan. A critic of the Ming dynasty once praised his works as "the sweet songs of the morning phoenix". "Autumn Thoughts", one of Ma's masterpieces, usually appears in a form containing a hsiao-ling followed by a t'ao-shu of seven songs. In this and the following pages, these two pieces which have delighted countless readers through the ages are presented in a translation which aims to preserve the natural style and simplicity of the original.*

## I

Withered vines, old trees, evening crows,  
A small bridge, flowing stream, and village huts.  
On an ancient road stands a lean horse in the west  
wind  
Against the westward setting sun—  
A heartbroken man at the edge of heaven.

枯藤老樹昏鴉  
小橋流水人家  
古道西風瘦馬  
夕陽西下  
斷腸人在天涯

# 馬致遠秋思

## II

A hundred years of lifetime is like a butterfly's dream.<sup>1</sup>

Thinking of the past makes me sad.  
Today comes the Spring;  
Tomorrow flowers will wither away.  
Drink more before the night is deep and the lamp is out.

Thinking of the palace of Han and Ch'in—  
Now become fields for sheep and cows—  
Were it not so, fishers and woodsmen would have no tales to tell.  
Ruined tombs scattered,  
Broken gravestone spread this way and that,  
Their dragons and snakes indecipherable.<sup>2</sup>

How many able men were entombed  
In lairs for fox and hare?  
The powerful tripod was broken.<sup>3</sup>  
Where is Wei?  
Where is Chin?

Wealth is heaven-sent,  
Make no excessive demand.  
Pleasant days and nights are few.  
Misers steel their hearts against spending,  
And rather give up the delights of the painted hall!

<sup>1</sup>An allusion to the story of Chuang Chou who once dreamed that he had become a butterfly. When he awoke he was perplexed by the question whether it was Chuang Chou dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that it was Chuang Chou. Cf. *Chuang Tzu* 2.

<sup>2</sup>"Dragons and snakes" refer to Chinese characters, especially those written in the *chuan* (篆) or *li* (隸) style in the Ch'in (248-207 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 219) periods.

<sup>3</sup>"The powerful tripod" refers to the period of the Three Kingdoms of China (A.D. 220-280) when the country was divided up into three states: Wei, Shu and Wu. Shu was conquered by Wei; Wei was taken over by a powerful vassal who founded Chin. Chin defeated Wu and united the whole country, but before long, Chin was divided up into several states which were locked in conflict. Eventually they were all brought under the sway of Sui.

百歲光陰一夢蝶  
重回首往事堪嗟  
今日春來  
明朝花謝  
急罰盞夜闌燈滅

想秦宮漢闕  
都做了衰草牛羊野  
不恁漁樵無話說  
縱荒墳  
橫斷碑  
不辨龍蛇

投至狐蹤與兔穴  
多少豪傑  
鼎足三分半腰折  
魏耶  
晉耶

天教你富  
莫太奢  
無多時好天良夜  
看錢奴硬將心似鐵  
爭辜負了錦堂風月

眼前紅日又西斜  
疾似下坡車  
曉來鏡裏添白雪  
上牀與鞋履相別  
休笑鳩巢計拙  
葫蘆提一向裝呆

利名竭  
是非絕  
紅塵不向門前惹  
綠樹偏宜屋角遮  
青山正補牆頭缺  
竹籬茅舍

蛩吟罷  
一覺纔寧貼  
鷄鳴後萬事無休歇  
爭名利何年是徹  
密匝匝蟻排兵  
亂紛紛蜂釀蜜  
鬧穰穰蠅爭血  
裴公綠野堂  
陶令白蓮社  
愛秋來那些  
和露摘黃花  
帶霜烹紫蟹  
煮酒燒紅葉  
人生有限杯  
渾幾個重陽節  
囑咐咱頑童記者  
便北海探吾來  
道東籬醉了也

Before my eyes the crimson sun sinks westward,  
Swift as a carriage down a slope.  
This morning my mirror reflected more white hairs!  
I bid farewell to my shoes and climb abed.  
Don't laugh at cuckoos too stupid to make their  
nests;

I too lack sense—pretend to be dim-witted!

Think no more of gold and fame,  
Talk no more of right and wrong.  
Red dust whirls no longer before my door,  
Green trees hid a corner of my house,  
Glaucous hills fill a crack in the broken wall:  
Fenced with bamboo, my peasant hut.

When crickets cease their chirping,  
Then only am I sound asleep;  
When the cock crows, all my labours begin!  
What end to the pursuit of gold and fame?  
Poor ants muster for war;  
Swarming bees seek honey from flowers;  
Flies fight to suck blood.  
In P'ei's Green Field Hall,<sup>4</sup>  
At T'ao's White Lotus Club,<sup>5</sup>  
I love the good things of Autumn:  
To pluck yellow flowers wet with the dew,  
To cook purple crabs on a frosty eve,  
And warm the wine by burning russet leaves.  
Life is but a limited cup.  
How many Double Nine Festivals can we enjoy?  
Tell that naughty lad of mine to remember—  
Should Pei-hai himself come to call,<sup>6</sup>  
Just say, "Tung-li is in his cups!"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>P'ei Tu (裴度) was a prime minister of the T'ang dynasty. After his retirement, he built a villa in Loyang which he named Lü-yeh-t'ang (綠野堂) or the Green Field Hall. He spent his time at his villa, abandoning social life.

<sup>5</sup>T'ao Ch'ien (陶潛) was a famous poet of the Chin dynasty. He was for a time the local magistrate of P'engtse (彭澤). After his retirement, he lived in Hsünyang (潯陽) and made friends with the members of the Pai-lien-she (白蓮社) or the White Lotus Club, formed by some local Buddhist monks.

<sup>6</sup>Pei-hai (北海), another name for K'ung Jung (孔融) of the Han period, well-known for his hospitality. It was said that his house was always full of guests and his wine jugs were never empty.

<sup>7</sup>Tung-li (東籬), the courtesy name of Ma Chih-yuan, the writer.