"The River at Dusk Is Saddening Me":
Cheng Ch'ou-yü and Tz'u Poetry

By Wai-leung Wong

A POPULAR BUT NOT prolific poet, Cheng Ch'ou-yü 鄭愁予 (1933-) is noted for his cute and charming lyricism, which is well exemplified by Tz'ao-wu 錯誤 (A Mistake):

I pass the country south of the River,
Where the face waiting in the seasons, lotus-like,
blossoms and withers.

No east wind, the willow catkins of March do not drift;
Your heart is a tiny lonely town,
Like a green stone street, toward evening.
No footfalls, the spring curtains of March do not part;
Your heart is a tiny casement tightly closed.

Clip-clop, the clatter of my horse's hoofs is a beautiful mistake:
I am not coming home, I'm a passer-by . . .

—"A Mistake"

Author's Note: I would like to thank Mr. Stephen C. Soong for his enlightening comments, which have improved the quality of this essay, but I assume full responsibility for all the views expressed.

¹Cheng Ch'ou-yü, whose real name is Cheng Wen-t'ao 鄭文韶, was born in 1933 in Hopei. After graduating from Chung Hsing 中興 University, he worked at the Harbor Bureau of Keelung, where he wrote his famous marine poems. In 1968 he attended the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa. Currently he is teaching Chinese at Yale University. His poems are gathered in Cheng Ch'ou-yü shih huan-chi 鄭愁予詩選集 (Selected Poems of Cheng Ch'ou-yü) (Taipei, Chih-wen 志文, 1974), with an introduction by Yang Mu 楊牧 (the pen-name of C.H. Wang 王旭欽). The introduction, running more than thirty pages, is loaded with insights into Cheng's poetry. Since the appearance of his Selected Poems, Cheng has published only a few poems. When this present essay was near completion, a new edition of Cheng's poems came out. The volume, Cheng Ch'ou-yü shih chi 鄭愁予詩集 (Taipei, Hung-fan 恆範, 1979), advertised as the "definitive edition . . . compiled by the poet himself", collects a total of 153 poems written from 1951-1968.
我打江南走過
那等在季節裏的容顏如蓮花的開落

東風不來，三月的柳絮不飛
你底心如小小的寂寞的城
恰若春石的街道向晚
雲影不覺，三月的春帷不揭
你底心是小小的窗扉緊掩

我達達的馬蹄是美麗的錯誤
我不是歸人，是個過客……

——「錯誤」

Put in a collection of Sung tz'u poetry (or lyrics) in English translation, the poem is likely to be mistaken by readers with little or no knowledge of modern Chinese poetry for a tz'u composition, undistinguishable from the rest of the collection. Indeed, in terms of imagery and sentiment, “A Mistake” comes extremely close to a tz'u poem of the wan-yüeh 翁衍 (beautiful and refined), as opposed to the hao-fang 豪放, (powerful and free) category.

But what does a tz'u poem of the wan-yüeh category look like? According to Miao Yuēh 謝 piè, one of the characteristics of tz'u poetry is its “smallness” in diction. What the reader often encounters in tz'u poetry, says Miao, are “breeze,” “broken clouds,” “sparse stars,” “distant mountains,” “misty isles,” “orioles,” “withered flowers,” “flying catskins,” etc., all related to “smallness.” To illustrate his point, he cites the following lyric to the tune Huan hsi sha 漣溪沙 by Ch'in Kuan 秦觀 (1049-1100):

A misty light chill ascends the small tower.
The morning sky, cloudy, with a touch of ennui, reminds one of late autumn.
Pale smoke, flowing water—the painted screen looks gloomy;

Free and easy, the flying petals are light as a dream.
From the vast sky falls a drizzle, fine as sorrow.
From the precious curtain, restfully hangs a tiny silver hook.

The poem, written in the wan-yüeh style, reminds one of Cheng’s “A Mistake”, which is characterized by such words of “smallness” as “lotus,” “east wind,” “willow catskins,” “tiny lonely town,” “green stone street,” “spring curtains” and “tiny casement.”

In Miao Yuēh’s opinion, tz'u is “light” in substance, “limited” in scope and “elusive” in meaning. The word “light” is used in both its physical and psychological senses. Physically, since it is “small,” it is “light.” A tz'u poem is not designed to arouse emotionally awe-

2 Miao Yuēh, Shih tz'u san lun 詩詞散論 (Essays on Shih and tz'u Poetry) (Taipei, K’ai-ming 開明, 1953, rpt.), P. 5. Miao comments on tz'u poetry as a whole. However, I think his remarks best illuminate the wan-yüeh 翁衍 category of tz'u, but not all tz'u poetry.

3 Ibid., pp. 6-10.
some and powerful reactions on the part of the reader and is therefore “light” in its psychological aspect. Since many examples can be drawn from classical lyrics as well as from Cheng’s poems to support the “lightness” statement, further elaboration on this point seems unnecessary.

As for Miao’s comment that tz’u is “elusive” in meaning, I have decided to put it aside for two reasons. First and foremost, a thorough discussion would require elaborate and lengthy explanations. Second, I have some reservation about Miao’s comment. At this point, I can only say that there are a large number of elusive tz’u and shih 詩 poems in Chinese literature; yet I am not quite sure whether tz’u or shih is more elusive.

In connection with the “limited” scope of tz’u poetry, Miao Yüeh has remarked that “tz’u is capable only of depicting feelings and scenery; it is absolutely not suitable for argument and narration.” Here Miao is actually prescribing the nature of tz’u. It is true that a large number of famous tz’u poems depict feelings and scenery instead of arguing an idea or narrating a story; but it is unjust to say that tz’u is incapable of arguing and narrating. In respect of scope, Miao Yüeh says that “of all Chinese literary genres, tz’u is the most refined; one cannot deal with elusive and sad feelings if one does not write in the form of tz’u.” Again I take this comment, especially the second half of it, with some reservation, for, even in expressing elusive and sad feelings, one does not always have to turn to tz’u. However, although the whole statement needs qualification, Miao has pointed out an important characteristic of tz’u: the feeling of sadness. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that sadness is the predominant sentiment of this genre. In the following paragraphs we shall discuss how the theme of sadness dominates tz’u and Cheng Ch’ou-yü’s poetry, and examine the recurrent images related to this theme.

We find sadness in shih poetry and other genres of Chinese literature, too, to be sure, but it is in tz’u poetry that sadness prevails, and this sadness is often gentle and abiding. The failure to serve and hopefully save one’s country, the decline and fall of a dynasty with which one has cast one’s lot—these and other similar situations usually result in sadness of a more intense type, in the tragic sense that marks the poetry of Ch’ü Yüan 楚原 (343?-278 B.C.) and Tu Fu 杜甫’s (712-770), as well as the works of Hsin Ch’i-chê 辛棄疾 (1140-1207) and other patriotic tz’u poets. In tz’u poems written in the wan-yüeh style, however, we do not encounter this kind of sadness. Instead, we find a sadness caused directly or indirectly by love—either the longing for love, love-sickness, or the parting of lovers. An example is Wen T’ing-yün 溫庭筠 (813?-870)’s Pu-sa man 菩薩鬘, in which the poet depicts a woman longing for love:

Like hills upon hills the golden screens reflect a glittering sun.
On her fragrant cheeks, white as snow, her hair drifts.
Languidly she gets up to draw her eyebrows
And dallies with her make-up.

A mirror in front and a mirror at the back reflect the flowers;
They and the face dazzle each other.
On her new topcoat of silk
A pair of golden partridges are embroidered.

4 Ibid., p. 8.
5 Ibid.
Getting up late in the morning, she is langorous and alone. By focusing on a pair of golden partridges, the poet suggests that she is lonely, longing for her companion.

In Li Ch'ing-chao 李清照 (1084?-1151)’s lyric to the tune I chien mei —剪梅, we can find the same kind of sentiment:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The pink lotus withers, the jade mat is autumn-cold.} & \quad \text{紅藕香殘玉簟秋}
\\
\text{Gently I unfasten my silk skirt} & \quad \text{輕解羅裳}
\\
\text{And alone board a magnolia boat.} & \quad \text{獨上蘭舟}
\\
\text{Who is to send me a letter of love via the clouds?} & \quad \text{雲中誰寄錦書來}
\\
\text{When the wild geese return,} & \quad \text{雁字回時}
\\
\text{The moon is full over the West tower.} & \quad \text{月滿西樓}
\\
\text{The petals drift and the water flows as usual—} & \quad \text{花自飄零水自流}
\\
\text{The same love-sickness:} & \quad \text{一種相思}
\\
\text{Sorrow at two places.} & \quad \text{兩處閒愁}
\\
\text{This feeling cannot be rid of;} & \quad \text{此情無計可消除}
\\
\text{It falls to my heart} & \quad \text{才下眉頭}
\\
\text{No sooner than it is relieved from my eyebrows.} & \quad \text{卻上心頭}
\end{align*}
\]

The poetess wrote this lyric when her husband was far away from home; and hence the love-sickness of separation. Another one dealing with a similar situation is Wen T'ing-yü'n's lyric to the tune I Chiang-nan 惆江南, in which the poet speaks on behalf of the woman waiting, in vain, for her lover:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Washed up and the hairdo completed,} & \quad \text{梳洗罷}
\\
\text{She alone leans out from the tower overlooking the river.} & \quad \text{獨倚望江樓}
\\
\text{A thousand sails have passed, no one brings back her lover.} & \quad \text{過盡千帆皆不是}
\\
\text{The setting sun lingers, the water gently flows.} & \quad \text{斜暉脈脈水悠悠}
\\
\text{Heart-broken she is, at the sandbank covered with white duckweeds.} & \quad \text{卻斷白蘋洲}
\end{align*}
\]

The woman in this poem has waited for the whole day—from the morning, after she has washed up herself, until the evening. The rails on which she leans must have been made warm, just like the bar in Dante G. Rossetti's poem “The Blessed Damozel”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The Blessed Damozel leaned out} & \quad \text{The gold bar of Heaven;}
\\
\text{From the gold bar of Heaven;} & \quad \text{....}
\\
\text{And still she bowed herself and stooped} & \quad \text{Out of the circling charm;}
\\
\text{Out of the circling charm;} & \quad \text{Until her bosom must have made}
\\
\text{Until her bosom must have made} & \quad \text{The bar she leaned on warm,}
\\
\text{The bar she leaned on warm,} & \quad \\
\end{align*}
\]

but her heart certainly gets colder and colder toward the end of the long wait in vain.

Besides sharing the common waiting-in-vain theme, Cheng Ch'ou-yü’s “A Mistake” resembles Wen T'ing-yü'n's I Chiang-nan also in terms of plot, only the woman in Wen's lyric is saved from the additional grief her counterpart in “A Mistake” has to experience. In the latter poem, the heroine’s high hope of welcoming the man home is dramatically shattered when the man on horseback declares, “I’m not coming home, I’m a passer-by.”
However, different as they are in other respects, the above tz’u poems, two by Wen T’ing-yün, one by Li Ch’ing-chao, and Cheng Ch’ou-yü’s “A Mistake”, all belong to the category of *kuet-yüan* 倩怨 (boudoir sadness) poems, which constitute a large corpus in Chinese literature.

The third kind of sadness springs from the parting of lovers, as is exemplified by Liu Yung 羲永 (fl. 1034)’s renowned lyric to the tune *Yu lin ling* 雨霖鈴:

_Cold cicadas sound sad and desperate;
It is twilight, at the long pavilion,
When the showers have just stopped.
Outside the city, we drink in the tent without cheer.
I want to linger awhile,
But the magnolia boat urges me to leave.
We hold each other’s hands, and look at each other’s tearful eyes,
Choking, unable to utter a word.
This journey covers a thousand miles of mists and waves,
Where the evening clouds are gloomy and the southern sky vast._

_Since ancient times, passionate lovers have suffered the sorrows of parting.
How could I stand my loneliness in this cold autumn?
When I sober up from wine tonight, where shall I be?
—Willow banks, morning breeze and the waning moon.
I shall be away for years,
The sweet moments and scenes will signify nothing.
Even if there are tender feelings of a thousand varieties,
Who is going to share them with me?_

Apart from the above three kinds of sadness, which are all love-oriented, there is yet another kind which is not easily identifiable. Ch’i’in Kuan’s _Huanhsi sha_ 順生詩沙, as previously cited, belongs to this last category. In such tz’u poems, the unhappy sentiments are caused by ennui, nostalgia, self-pity or self-lament, examples of which are too numerous to cite.  

**Thus sadness is the archetypal sentiment in tz’u poetry written in the wanyüeh style.** Cheng Ch’ou-yü shares this sad sentiment with many traditional tz’u writers. The woman in his “A Mistake” is waiting for her love to vain; her lonely heart is “a tiny casement tightly closed.” In sentiment this poem does not differ much from the “boudoir sadness” verse by Wen T’ing-yün and other tz’u writers. But in terms of artistic achievement, the fine lines in this poem

_Clip-clop, the clatter of my horse’s hoofs is a beautiful mistake:
I’m not coming home, I’m a passer-by..._

---

are so dramatic and epigrammatic that it outshines many other lyrics belonging to the same category.

The heroine in a number of Cheng's poems is the typical solitary woman in endless waiting. Sometimes, the solitude is imposed by a proud, manipulating man, as is shown in his Ch'ing-fu 情婦 (Mistress):

*In a small town with green stone streets lives my mistress
Whom I left without a thing
Except a bed of gold-thread chrysanthemums and a high window
Which perhaps admits lonesomeness from the blue.
Perhaps... but chrysanthemums are patient in waiting.
I suppose lonesomeness and waiting are good for women.*

*So I never went there but in a gown of blue
That she might feel it was the season
Or the bird's migration,
For I'm not the kind of person who keeps going home.*

tr. by Yü Kwang-chung 余光中

在一個石的小城，住着我的情婦
而我什麼也不給她
祇有一疊金菊花，和一個高高細窗口
或許，透一點長空的寂寥進來
或許……而金菊花是善等待的
我想，寂寞與等待，對娘人是好的

所以，我去，總穿一襲藍衫子
我要她感覺，那是季節，或
候鳥的來臨
因我不是常常回家的那種人

Here again is the man, proud and lordly:

*In the tiny Sister Harbor, when the men mooring there are raptured
You will have a gentle tide,
Which is the swell of a girl's passionate tears.*

---

Nestling against all the helms and clinging to the edge of mooring men's dream,
Perhaps you will move me and cause me to slowly cast the long anchor in spite of myself.
—“Chieh-mei kang” (Sisters Harbor)

The element of male chauvinism is most clearly revealed by Ch'uang wai te nü-nü 窗外的女奴 (Slave-girls Outside the Window) where, in the form of metaphor, the man regards his girls as slaves:

I am God facing south. My naked arms are wrapped with the gauze-like night, so that the stars hanging down the wrists are my slave-girls.

我是兩面的神，裸著的肩用紗模的黑夜纏繞。於是，垂在腕上星星是我的女奴。

Such poems with lordly attitudes might appear offensive to some modern readers. But this is what Cheng Ch'ou-yü is.

Cheng has written about the parting of lovers in the traditional vein of "beautiful and refined" tz'u poetry as well. The following is quoted from his Fu-pieh 異別 (Parting):

This time I take leave of you; it is wind, rain, and evening.
You smile and I wave my hand,
And a lonely road extends in two directions.
By now you must have returned to your home by the river bank,
Combing your long hair or putting your wet overcoat in order.
Yet my return journey in the wind and rain is still long.
The mountain recedes into the distance, the plain expands wider and wider.
Alas, in this world, I am afraid, darkness has indeed taken shape...
The setting of this poem—"it is wind, rain, and evening"—is identical with that of Liu Yung’s Yü lin ling.

Cheng Ch’ou-yü is the pen-name of Cheng Wen-t’ao 鄭文焯. The characters Ch’ou-yü 慕予 appeared at least in two famous pieces of traditional Chinese poetry. One is Hsiang Fu-jen 楚夫人的 Ch’u-tz’u 楚辭, the other is P’u-sa man 師壇蠻, “Written on a Wall at Tsao-k’ou in Chiang-hsi 顯西造口壁” by Hsin Ch’i-chi. They read respectively:

*The Child of God descends on the northern isle.*
Looking afar, I am saddened.
Gently the autumn wind blows;
On the Tung-t’ing Lake leaves are falling.

*The river at dusk is saddening me;*
Deep in the mountains I hear the sound of partridges.

The line “The river at dusk is saddening me” is especially significant in our present discussion for two reasons. First, the poet’s surname 鄭 and the character 正 in Cheng Ch’ou-yü 慕予 (is saddening me) are homonyms; it is very likely that the pen-name Cheng Ch’ou-yü was adopted from this line. Second, the word wan 惱 (at dusk; evening) and a cluster of words with meanings similar to it appear again and again in tz’u poetry in general and in Cheng Ch’ou-yü’s poetry in particular. Wan as a recurrent image is a key to understanding the unique mood and sentiment of tz’u poetry; it is also a key to understanding the similarity between Cheng Ch’ou-yü’s work and tz’u lyricism.

IN THE ARTICLE, we have so far quoted in entirety or in part six tz’u poems, all taken from anthologies at random:

1. Huan hsi sha 聯 trebuie by Ch’iin Kuan;
2. P’u-sa man 師壇蠻 by Wen T’ing-yün;
3. I chien mei 我前梅 by Li Ch’ing-chao;
4. I Chiang-nan 我江南 by Wen T’ing-yün;
5. Yü lin ling 显西造口壁 by Liu Yung;
6. P’u-sa man 師壇蠻 by Hsin Ch’i-chi.

Of these, four (poems three to six)—in other words, a two-third majority—deal with events happening in the evening and/or night. In fact, wherever the time element can be identified with certainty, the vast majority of tz’u poems are found to depict things that happen in the evening and/or night. Evening (and/or night) is the archetypal time in tz’u poetry.

Northrop Frye, dean of the school of archetypal criticism, rightly states that the thematic mode of tragedy is one of fall and death; tragedy is comparable to the evening of a day, and to the autumn season of a year, both of which symbolize fall and death in the cyclical movement of nature. (In contrast, according to Frye, comedy is comparable to morning or spring, while romance is noon or summer.) Frye’s archetypal criticism is a huge framework within which the critic has built a hierarchic world of literature.8 Though Frye

draws little from Chinese literature in building his theoretical framework, it does not mean that Chinese literature cannot fit into his framework. In Chinese literature, evening sadness has a long tradition; so does autumn sadness. It is late in the day when the sun sets and then "dies" in the west. It is late in the year when autumn comes, with the plants withering, the animals and birds hiding themselves and most living things decaying. In traditional China, criminals were often executed in autumn rather than in other seasons. Naturally, evening and autumn are the "objective correlatives" of sadness. The blending of sadness, autumn and evening together is the fusion of emotion with external objects (ch'ing ching chiao jung 像景交融), which is one of the most important canons in Chinese poetics. Substitute sadness for tragicness, and we will find Frye's archetypal theory very helpful in illuminating the correlation between the sentiment of tz'u and its imagery. Very often, evening, autumn, and all the elements of sadness may appear in a single lyric. For example, the season of two of the four "evening" lyrics (that is, poems three and five) can be unmistakably identified as autumn.

Though there are archetypes in literature, creative writing is by no means a mere complying with cut and dried formulas. Spring, instead of autumn, can also make people feel sad; but the effect is always achieved by ironic contrast, or by focusing on the lateness of the season. Here is the first part of Ch'in Kuan's T'ao so hsing 踏莎行:

\[
\text{In the fog, the towers and terraces are lost.}
\]

\[
\text{In the moonlight, the pier can hardly be seen.}
\]

\[
\text{Though I have strained my eyes, the Peach Blossom Utopia is nowhere to be found.}
\]

\[
\text{How could I bear to live in a lone inn locked in spring chill?}
\]

\[
\text{Amid the cries of cuckoos, the sun is setting.}
\]

The season is spring, but it is a chilly spring, with the weather completely contrary to that of the archetypal spring day, when the breeze is gentle and the sun warm. Then there is the lateness of spring that causes sadness, as is found in Yen Shu 吳殊 (991-1055)'s famous Huan hsi sha:

\[
\text{A newly composed lyric, a cup of wine.}
\]

\[
\text{Last year's weather, at the same pavilion.}
\]

\[
\text{The sun is setting—when will it return?}
\]

\[
\text{It can't be helped: the flowers are falling.}
\]

\[
\text{They look familiar: the swallows are coming back.}
\]

\[
\text{In the fragrant garden path, alone I linger.}
\]

Morning, instead of evening, can also bring about sadness; but, again, the result is always achieved by ironic contrast or by focusing on its lateness. In Ch'in Kuan's Huan hsi sha, quoted above, the morning is not the archetypal morning, when the sunshine is bright and warm; rather, it is a cloudy and chilly morning, "like late autumn." In Wen T'ing-yün's Pu-sao man, also quoted above, it is late rather than early in the morning that the action takes

place ("And dallies with her make-up late"). Borrowing Frye's theory of displacement,\textsuperscript{10} we may say that in these poems, since spring is chilly and morning cloudy, since spring and morning are both in their late periods, they assume the moods of autumn and evening.

GOING BACK TO CHENG CH'OU-YÜ'S poems, we see that the time of "A Mistake" is "toward evening." Although the season of the poem is spring, it is not in the spring mood, because there is "no east wind": "the willow catkins of March do not drift ... the spring curtains of March do not part." As the first line indicates, the time of "Parting" is clearly evening, which is the favorite time of the day in Cheng Ch'ou-yü's poetry.

The speaker in Cheng's poems is usually a vagrant minstrel, who takes leave of his girls and travels alone, writing his poems and drinking his wine. At one time, he sees a deserted fortress, around which are

\begin{quote}
The nervous and hollow loophole eyes, 
The nails on which bugles were hung, 
The lookout tower battlements 
. Worn flat by evenings and homesick boots.
\end{quote}

怔忡而空曠的箭眼
掛過號角的鐵釘
被人遺忘和望歸的帳幕 créer
成軀的石梁啊

He laments the decaying place, is nostalgic about its heroes and warriors, and then,

\begin{quote}
In the moonlight let me deliver "The General's Order" 
Playtive on my lute...
\end{quote}

\begin{center}
—"Ts' an pao"
"Deserted Fortress"
tr. by Yü Kwang-chung
\end{center}

趁月色，我傳下悲哀的「將軍令」
自琴絃……

——「廢堡」

Here the time is his favorite evening. At another time, again in the evening, he joins the lonely travellers in a country inn, a "home" lit by campfire, where wine and meat are served, where men talk with each other about their vagrancy. This is his Yeh tien 野店 (Country Inn), which begins with the following couplet:

\begin{quote}
Who passed to us the poet's profession? 
Hoisting a lamp in the evening.
\end{quote}

是誰傳下這詩人的行業
黃昏裡掛起一盞燈

At sunset, when the color of the sky quickly changes, the passage of time is most

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{10}By "displacement" Frye means "the adaptation of myth and metaphor to canons of morality or plausibility"; see Frye, p. 365.
\end{footnotesize}
conspicuous. Time passes; and with time the hero, the beauty, and indeed history and life. These are causes of sadness in much of Cheng's poetry. But Cheng the contemplative poet is sometimes fascinated merely by the passage of a colorful scene in the evening. In his *Wan hung chīh shih* 晚虹之逝 (Passage of an Evening Rainbow) the short-lived color belt is in the western sky,

*But evening says it is now cold  
And covers the pretty red tie with his big gray lapel.*

但黃昏說是冷了  
用灰色的大翻領蓋上那條美麗的紅領帶

Another "evening" poem is *Wan Yun* 晚雲 (Evening Clouds):

*Here comes July, craggy are the evening clouds of July,  
Look up at the blue river tender and slow through the canyons.*

*Suddenly, autumn droops her girdle and unties her brocade purse:  
Small hands all across the plain waving, are filled with gold.*

*Or as if in winter,  
Busy partridges trudging for miles in the snow at night  
To catch the last fair of the year...  
(tr. by Yū Kwang-chung)*

七月來了，七月的雲雲如山，  
仰觀那藍河多陝而柔緩。

突然，秋垂落其飄帶，解其錦囊，  
搖擺在整個大平原上的小手都握了黃金。

又像是冬天，  
匆忙的鸝鶻們走伴里積雪的夜路，  
趕年關最後的集……

Like the previous one, this poem is purely a description of the evening scene.

Thus we see that Cheng Ch'iou-yü shares with traditional tz'u poets the obsession with evening; both the modern poet and his classical counterparts use diction that is "small" and the substance of their poems is usually "light." Is Cheng's preoccupation with evening and "smallness" descended from the tz'u tradition? Or is their similarity a mere coincidence? It is difficult to tell. But as far as tradition is concerned, one thing is clear: Cheng has drawn phrases and ideas from some of the most famous tz'u poems. Apart from his pen-name, which we have discussed above, the line "Autumn droops her girdle and unties her brocade purse" from "Wan yün", for instance, is obviously borrowed from "the fragrant bag is secretly untied, the silk girdle lightly detached," (香囊暗解，羅帶輕分) which are lines in Ch'in Kuan's *Man T'ing jung* 萬廷芳.

*Autumn appears in Cheng's poems—*T'ang hsi-feng tsou kuo 當西風走過 (When the West Wind Passes) and *Tz'ao-li-ch'ung* 輕露蟲 (Paramecium), for example—too, but not as
often as evening. Evening is sad; so is autumn. When it is autumn evening, sadness in the poem becomes more poignant. However, as we have seen, sadness is the sentiment that dominates only some of Cheng's poems. Cheng is not a poet writing in Su Shih 蘇軾 (1037-1101)'s or Hsin Ch'i-chü's "powerful and free" style; neither is he a Ch'in Kuan chanting his sadly "beautiful and refined" lyrics. His poems are "beautiful and refined", but only with an occasional touch of sadness. Few modern Chinese poets resemble the traditional Tzu'u poets as closely as Cheng, whose work is a worthy continuation of the Tzu'u tradition. A poet writing entirely in the shadow of his predecessors would have no significance of his own. Cheng is not such a poet. His modern vocabulary and syntax, together with his sensibility and skill, have created a distinguished style. He borrows phrases and ideas from the tradition, but is original in his art, especially in creating his own metaphors.

Since the literary revolution, the language of modern Chinese poetry has been in the main what is called vernacular as opposed to the classical. Vernacular Chinese, characterized by its use of modern syntax and vocabulary, has indeed injected vitality into classical Chinese. But, in the hands of inferior writers, the vernacular language often appears crude and clumsy, sometimes even outrageous, to discerning eyes.

However, with Cheng Ch'ou-yü's language, we find a remarkable maturity to which not many Chinese poets up to the fifties could have aspired. For example, in Cheng's Hsiao-hsiao te tao 小小的島 (A Small Island), a lovely piece which reminds one of W.B. Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," the vocabulary and syntax are unmistakably modern, yet the use of words is beautifully economical, as can be seen in the first stanza of the poem:

The small, small island where you live I'm now thinking of,
It belongs to the tropics, to the kingdom of green.
On the shallow sand, fishes of five colors
always dwell,
Little birds leap and sing on the branches, like piano keys
going up and down.

Another example, Cheng's famous line and a half, which have already been cited, reflects the same virtue:

In the moonlight I deliver the "General's Order"
Plaintive on my lute . . .

The following epigrammatic couplet from Piēh-chieh chiü-tien 邊界酒 (Tavern on the Border), again a combination of modern vernacular features with poetic refinement,

How he desired to step across! One single step, and it's homesickness.
That beautiful homesickness, tangible at an arm's stretch.

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would in inferior hands become

他多麼地想要踢出他的蛩啊, 他的一個步伐
就可以使他感染到鄉愁了
那個美麗的鄉愁呀，他的一隻手伸出去
就可以觸摸到它了

Cheng is skillful at creating metaphors, the capacity for which is generally regarded as a sign of poetic genius. Cheng compares an evening rainbow to a “beautiful red neck-tie” and the vanishing of this rainbow to the tie’s being covered by “A big gray lapel” (“Passage of an Evening Rainbow”). The first stanza of Yeh ke 夜歌 (Night Song) is based on a metaphor:

Now our harbor is quiet
The tall cranes point their long noses at the sky
Like giant elephants reaching for food
And the stars everywhere in the sky are drooping like fruits

這時，我們的港是靜了
高聳聳重機的長鼻指着天
恰似匹練採食的巨象
而滿天欲墜的星斗如果實

The image of elephants reaching for fruits is quite a lovely one; modern poets with anti-industrialization sentiments (Robert Lowell, for instance) would hardly look at the operation of the “ugly” cranes from such an angle. However, having gathered a bundle of beautiful images during the years he was working at the Harbor Bureau of Keelung, and following in the steps of traditional Chinese tz’u poets, who often tended to romanticize the things they saw, Cheng Chou-yü has chosen to view industrialization with a friendly eye.

Of all the poems Cheng wrote at the harbor, “As Though in a Mist” is perhaps the prettiest:

I came back from the sea, bringing the mariner’s stars two
and twenty.
You ask me about the voyage; I look up at the sky and
smile . . .
As though in a mist,
The earrings ringing, we groped through the dark tresses,
Parting the eyelashes with the lightest of breaths, for the
lighthouse light.

The equator was a streak of moist red, fading as you smiled.
The meridian was a string of dark blue pearls
That shed for dividing time when you fell fast in thought.

I come back from the sea whose treasures you own
aplenity . .
The approaching shells, the reproaching sunset clouds,
And the coral reef I wouldn’t risk steering near.

—“As Though in a Mist”
tr. by Yü Kwang-chung
我從海上來，帶回航海的二十二顆星。
你問我航海的事兒，我仰天笑了……
如霧起時
戴叮叮的耳環在濃密的髮香找航路；
用最細最細的繃絲，吹開睫毛引燈塔的光。

赤道是一簇潤紅的線，你笑時不見。
子午線是一串暗藍的珍珠。
當你思念時即將時間的分隔而瀲落。

我從海上來，你有海上的珍奇太多了……
迎人的風具，噴人的晚雲，
和使我不敢輕易近航的珊瑚的礁區。

——《如霧起時》

In this poem, readers can still find such words as “stars”, “earrings”, “lightest”, “streak”, “pearls” and “shells”, which are similar to those in classical tz’u in their “smallness”. But it hardly resembles tz’u poems written in the wan-yüeh style. Such terms as “lighthouse”, “equator”, “meridian” and “coral reef”, unknown to people about 1,000 years ago, are only used by modern men. The life of a mariner too, as far as I know, never appeared as a theme in tz’u poetry of the Sung dynasty. As it is, the above poem is the work of a modern Chinese poet who has succeeded in assimilating the “short song” (小令) technique of classical tz’u poetry. It begins with a mariner coming back from the sea, who when asked about the voyage in a rendezvous with his girl, only smiles and answers the question indirectly. With the girl apparently in his embrace, the mariner tells her how he groped through the thick mist, ringing the bells to look for the light of the lighthouse; how the equator and the meridian are alike; what the shells, the evening clouds and the coral reef signify to him. All the things the mariner recounts are metaphors: the mist is the girl’s tresses, the bells her earrings, the lighthouse her bright eyes, the equator the thin line between her lips in their closure, the meridian her tear drops, the shells her teeth, the evening clouds her cheeks, and the coral reef (which the mariner wouldn’t risk approaching) her body. What the mariner perceived and conceived on his voyage are all related to his girl. In such a short poem, colors (red, blue, black and white), lines (vertical as well as horizontal), sounds and emotions (sorrow and gaiety) are richly interwoven. With its language so refined, its images so evocative, it can certainly rank with the most beautiful love poems written in Chinese. Indeed, it can be regarded as a triumph of metaphors.

In “A Mistake”, quoted at the beginning of this essay, metaphors again play an important role: “...the face waiting in the seasons, lotus-like, blossoms and withers,” “Your heart is a tiny lonely town/Like a green stone street, toward evening,” and “Your heart is a tiny casement tightly closed” are all metaphors. But what Cheng Ch’ou-yü has achieved in “A Mistake” is not merely its metaphorical language. Its structure and the paradox at the end, too, are excellent. The poem begins with the vast country south of the River, then zooms to the town, the street, the curtain, the casement, the invisible, yet central, figure—the woman who has been waiting for seasons in loneliness—and then to her dramatic encounter with the man. The climax of the story comes briefly but forcefully when the “beautiful” hope is shattered: the hope is “beautiful” but it is a “mistake”, for the man is not coming home. The poem does not tell us how the merciless man leaves the woman and continues his journey, but with the word “passer-by” we can imagine that, as he leaves, the scene shifts from the casement to the street, to the town and to the vast country, and the story ends where it began. Whereas the words “pass” in the first line and “passer-by” in the
last complete the circular structure of the poem, the "tiny lonely town," the "green stone street" and the "tiny casement tightly closed," with sizes varying from big to small, occupy strategic points in this structure. The objects, either "tiny," "closed" or "green" (obviously a cold color), apart from providing the poem with the setting, also describe the woman's feelings of loneliness and alienation. That these words can perform a double function testifies fully to Cheng's fine and subtle craftsmanship. The theme and sentiment of "A Mistake" are very traditional; it is one of the numerous guei yüan (boudoir sadness) poems depicting the loneliness of women in their endless waiting for men. There is little difference between the woman in this poem and those in tz'u pieces. One cannot, for instance, tell the woman in "A Mistake" from her counterpart in Wen T'ing-yün's I Chiang-nan, cited above. Yet, despite all these similarities, "A Mistake," with its modern syntax and verbal paradox ("a beautiful mistake"), has an unmistakable modern ring. For the verbal paradox, though a favorite rhetorical device in modern Western and Chinese poetry, is rare in classical Chinese poetry. It is precisely in this sense that "A Mistake" can lay full claim to modernity.

Cheng is not yet a major poet, for, up to the present, his scope (both thematically and technically speaking) is still limited, and the quantity of his work is less than impressive. Yet surely impressive is his charming lyricism, which is a worthy continuation and development of the classical tz'u tradition.

11 He has written about 160 poems in some thirty years.