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 (套歎 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.

馬致遠秋思

枯藤老樹昏鴦
小橋流水人家
古道西風瘦馬
夕陽西下
斷腸人在天涯
II

A hundred years of lifetime is like a butterfly’s dream.\(^1\)
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.\(^2\)

How many able men were entombed
In lairs for fox and hare?
The powerful tripod was broken.\(^3\)
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!

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\(^1\) 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.

\(^2\) "Dragons and snakes" refer to Chinese characters, especially those written in the chuan (onium) or li (in) style in the Ch’in (248-207 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 219) periods.

\(^3\) "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.
Autumn Thoughts

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 must for war;
Swarming bees seek honey from flowers;
Flies fight to suck blood.

In Pei’s Green Field Hall,\(^4\)
At T’ao’s White Lotus Club,\(^5\)
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,\(^6\)
Just say, “Tung-li is in his cups!”\(^7\)

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\(^4\) Pei Tu (裴度) was a prime minister of the T’ang dynasty. After his retirement, he built a villa in Loyang which he named Li-yeh-t’ang (麗野堂) or the Green Field Hall. He spent his time at his villa, abandoning social life.

\(^5\) T’ao Ch’ien (陶鎰) was a famous poet of the Chin dynasty. He was for a time the local magistrate of Pengte (彭澤). After his retirement, he lived in Huilung (惠陽) and made friends with the members of the Pai-lien-shu (白蓮社) or the White Lotus Club, formed by some local Buddhist monks.

\(^6\) Pei-hai (孔融), 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.

\(^7\) Tung-li (東離), the courtesy name of Ma Chih-yuan, the writer.