

Misfortune

Put arrogance aside
Guard against misfortune
Reflect on Yue Yi who was not such a good General
For Yan he almost subjugated the State of Qi
Just one battle of the fire bulls almost cost him his life
Pursue someone?
Just stop before catching up.

In order to understand this poem some Chinese history, which was ancient even when Ma wrote, is necessary. The Warring States period covers the period between 475 BC until the unification of China by the Qin Dynasty in 221 BC. During this time regional warlords annexed smaller States. By the third century BC seven major States had risen to prominence – Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao, Wei and Qin. The State of Yan was in the northeast, around the area of modern Beijing. The two strongest were Yan and Qi and they were at war. King Zhao of Yan appointed Yue Yi as his commanding general. He is regarded in Chinese history as one of the most brilliant generals ever on the field of battle. A mighty coalition force was raised with Yan being joined by Zhao, Chu, Han and Wei. Within six months Yue Yi conquered more than 70 Qi fortresses leaving only two intact. One was Jimo. The resistance of these two, especially Jimo, was formidable. So much so that three years later, Yue Yi was still besieging them. Yue Yi was not a particularly violent man. He detested killing for no reason. His plan was to simply wait until they surrendered.

In Jimo the leader of what was left of Qi's army was Tian Dan. He only had some 7000 soldiers at his disposal. However Tian Dan set about involving everyone in Jimo in the resistance. He was aided by Yue Yi's enemies, who were suggesting to the King of Yan that Yue Yi was just biding his time so he could become the next King of Qi. The line was – if Yue Yi could take 70 Qi fortresses in six months why could he not defeat two in three years? The King did not believe any of this. However he died and his son took the throne. The son believed the informers and ordered Yue Yi to be executed. Yue Yi fled

to the State of Zhao where he spent the rest of his life as a military instructor.

Another General, Qi Jie, was appointed as commander of the Yan forces. He immediately commenced relentless assaults on the walls of Jimo but these were all repelled by Tian Dan. A frustrated Qi Jie ordered the mutilation of all of the Qi prisoners and his soldiers to dig up and desecrate the Qi ancestral tombs. This was designed to break the spirit of the Qi resistance. However these acts only encouraged the Qi defenders.

Tian Dan devised a plan. It was known as the Flaring Bull formation. A thousand bulls were gathered and were draped with blankets painted in garish reds and greens with sharp knives fastened to their horns. Bunches of reeds soaked in oil were attached to their tails.

One night Tian Dan ordered that parts of the Jimo walls be removed. The reeds on the bulls' tails were set on fire and they were driven out of Jimo. The bulls, maddened by pain, stampeded towards the Yan encampment followed by the Qi troops and most of the inhabitants of Jimo. It worked. Chaos reigned amongst the Yan soldiers as they fled for their lives. Qi Jie tried to escape but he was killed by Tian Dan.

The whole of the Qi kingdom was rallied by the breaking of the siege of Jimo. Within two months Tian Dan and his ever increasing army retook all of the 70 lost fortresses.

What's Left?

Think of the palaces of Qin
the watchtowers of Han
All now only withered pasture
feeding cattle and sheep
If it were otherwise fishermen and woodcutters
would have nothing to chat about
Lines of desolate tombs and fallen stone tablets
Difficult to distinguish dragons and snakes.

The reference to dragons and snakes was traditionally understood to be a vigorous style of calligraphy. Here the meaning is the difficulty of reading what was recorded on the stone tablets.

Who Cares?

Under fox tracks and rabbit warrens
How many heroes lay buried
A sturdy tripod broken in the middle
Who won?
Was it Wei?
Was it Jin?

The tripod is a symbolic reference to the so-called Three Kingdoms period (220–280) during which three States – Wei, Shu and Wu – struggled for supremacy. It was one of the bloodiest periods in Chinese history with enormous loss of life. In the end they were all defeated by a prominent Wei family, the Sima Yan, who usurped power and established the Jin Dynasty (265–420).

A Bad Dream

Dressed in rough cotton clothes
I ask of our country's great heroes:
What use is the pursuit of high office
and hegemonic ambition?
Wild grain grows high on the palaces
of the Six Dynasties
Innumerable trees grow far and near
on scattered noble graves
All just a bad dream.

This is a fascinating short poem. The link between rough cotton clothes and the country's great heroes is to be found in the fact that the rulers of four of the Six Dynasties (220–589) came from very humble origins. This was the period immediately following the collapse of the Han Dynasty in 220. They became the rulers of Lu Song (420–479), Qi (479–502), Liang (502–557) and Chan (557–589) respectively. It was a period of disunity, instability and almost constant warfare. As appears from the date sequences they struggled for power and lost it one after the other. Each of the dynasties had their capital at Jiangkang (or Jinling) which is now known as Nanjing.

Ma uses two lines taken almost character for character from a poem written by a Tang Dynasty poet, Xu Hun, entitled "Jin Ling's Unpleasant Past". They are the lines: "Wild grain ... scattered noble graves". In Xu's poem they are merely descriptive of the site of the palaces and graves on the outskirts of Jiangkang. Ma uses them for a different and powerful statement of his views about the futility of their efforts.

Xunyang River

A guest farewelled at the river
Cold in the autumn night
Heart-breaking music from a pipa
 played by a lonely river merchant's wife
The host listened with melancholy
 in his heart
The moon was bright
The effects of wine dispelled
The host and guest suddenly sober.

The host was the famous Tang poet, scholar and administrator Bai Juyi (772–846). He had been banished from the capital in 815 as a result of political conflict and appointed to a relatively minor administrative position in Xunyang or Jiujiang as it was also known. It was a long way from the capital.

In the poem Bai Juyi is not mentioned by name but rather by reference to the technical description of the office which he then held. It once meant Minister of War but by Bai's time it described a relatively humble official position.

The title of the poem refers to the then name of that part of the Long River (Yangtze) that flowed through Xunyang.

Ma is playing with one of Bai Juyi's most well known poems, "The Song of the Lute", which he wrote during his exile in Jiujiang. It is a long poem with a prose introduction. Ma's condensation of it contains only 30 characters. The introduction was as follows:

Song of the Lute

In the 10th year of the Yuanhe Period (815 AD) I was demoted to deputy-governor and exiled to Jiujiang. In autumn the next year, I was seeing a friend off at the Penpu ferry when I heard through the night someone playing lute in a boat. The tune, crisp and metallic, carried the flavour of the music of the capital. I asked her who she was, and she told me she was a prostitute

from the capital, Changan, and had learned to play lute from Master Mu and Master Cao. Now she was old and her beauty had declined and therefore she had married a merchant. So I ordered wine and asked her to play several tunes. We fell silent for a while. Then she told me about the pleasure of her youth, though now she is low and withered, drifting about on rivers and lakes. I had been assigned to posts outside the capital for two years and had enjoyed myself in peace. But touched by her words, that evening I began to realise what I truly felt about being exiled. So I wrote this long poem for her with a total of 612 characters, entitled ‘Song of the Lute’.¹

Ma’s brief poem seems to me to be a statement by him to the effect that life under Mongol rule for Chinese intellectuals was essentially one of exile, like the fate of Bai Juyi, and pain, like the fate of the river merchant’s wife.

It is interesting to note that Ma used a very different version of the story in Bai’s poem as the plot for his play – “Jiangzhou Sima Qing San Lei” (Tears on the Blue Gown of Bai Juyi). In it Ma has Bai Juyi recognising the woman as his great love when he held high office in the capital. She was then the famous courtesan Pei Xing Nu. When he was banished to Xunyang a merchant gave her a forged letter which falsely stated that Bai was dead. He then persuaded Pei to marry him. Ma has the reunited Bai and Pei going off together in the guest’s boat. Eventually all ends happily with the guest returning to the capital, attaining high office and causing Bai to be reinstated and Pei’s marriage to the merchant annulled.

1 The translation is by Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping. This and their quite marvellous translation of the long poem appear in *The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry* (2005), pp. 174 et seq.

Phoenix Terrace

Hundred-foot tower
Now a heap of yellow soil
Nong Yu played her flute
 accompanied by Xiao Shi
When together they departed
 ascending to the blue heavens
Today their State
is long gone
The distress of those times
 invites reflection
Will the phoenixes ever return?

In this poem Ma draws on what was even then an old folk tale. There is an undercurrent, apparent from the last lines, that there is no easy escape from the rigours of Mongol rule.

The folk tale is set in what is known as the Spring and Autumn Period (777–476 BC). It was a chaotic time of disputes and warfare and complex interstate relations and rivalries which in its later period involved the States of Qi, Jin, Qin, Song and Chu. The tale varies in its details but I like the following:

Duke Wu was the head, or overlord, of the Qin State. He had a daughter. On her first birthday, as was the custom, several different objects were put on a plate before her. It was thought that depending upon the object the baby picked up there would be some indication of her future. On the plate there was money, an ink brush, jewels, books and other things. The Duke's daughter clutched a piece of jade. Thus her name – Nong Yu – means playing with jade.

She grew up to be very beautiful, gentle and clever. She became a virtuoso player of the flute. The music was so beautiful that all manner of birds would congregate to hear it. The Duke had an open-air terrace created as a kind of stage on which she would play. This was later to become known as the Phoenix Terrace.



This is a painting on silk by the Late Qing painters
Qu Zhaolin (1866–1937) and Wu Baoheng entitled
'A Pair of Phoenixes amongst Tree Peonies'.

*It is held in the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing and is
reproduced with the Museum's kind permission.*

Her father had plans to advance his political position by arranging for her to marry the son of one of the heads of the other States. She refused, saying that she would only marry a person who could play the flute as beautifully as she could so that they could share their love of music.

One night Nong Yu was playing in the moonlight when she heard the music of a flute floating on the wind that was in perfect harmony with hers. This happened on several consecutive nights. She told her father so the Duke had the whole Qin State searched to find the player. Finally a poor but master musician was found named Xiao Shi. Shortly after, they were married and lived a happy life.

The couple made music together all the time. So beautiful was it that phoenixes came to the terrace to listen. One night a phoenix arrived with a red dragon. Together – he riding the dragon and she the phoenix – they ascended to the firmament and left this world.

The phoenix and the dragon are traditional animals of auspiciousness. In particular the phoenix as a supernatural bird embodied the five virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity. It harmed not a single insect or blade of grass. The Wutong or Chinese parasol tree was the only one in which it would roost. The bird's diet was bamboo seeds and spring water. In combination the phoenix and the dragon together were thought to herald a glorious period of peace and propriety. This is reflected in the Chinese saying: "When the dragon soars and the phoenix dances, the people will enjoy happiness for years, bringing peace and tranquillity to all under heaven".

Thus keeping the subject matter of the poem in mind, it is perhaps easier to understand my initial comment. When, if ever, will phoenixes return to rescue the Han people from their Mongol rulers?

The contrast in the first two lines reflects Ma's attitude to the inevitability of the transience of things. The human splendour of a hundred-foot tower or terraces reduced to a heap of yellow soil.

Indigo Bridge Post Station

Jade pestle idle
Black frost all ground up
He dared to hope for floating cloud's love
 at Blue Bridge
Pei Hang himself became a celestial being
Starting as a Jade Thief
He became a moon lover and harvester
 of cassia trees.

Ma is referring to a popular story dating back to Tang times (618–907). The story was told by Pei Xing (825–880) in his *Chuan Qi* (*Weird Tales*) which was a collection of short stories that fascinated his Tang audience. The following is a précis but it gives the flavour of the nature of these stories. They were frequently narrated in tea houses and similar places all over the country by travelling professional storytellers.

A scholar named Pei Hang had failed the Imperial Examinations. Despondent, he wandered around the country. Once he was travelling on a large boat when he met an extraordinarily beautiful woman named Madam Fan. He sent a poem to her through her maidservant, Misty Wreath, whom he bribed to deliver it. There was no reply, so when the boat next stopped he purchased some fruit and wine which he presented to Madam Fan again through her maid. She told Misty Wreath to invite him to her cabin where they drank the wine. In fact Madam Fan was married and she was travelling to meet her husband. After this meeting she wrote him a poem in return.

Drinking your wine I was deeply moved
Once the elixir is well ground you shall see Yunying
Indigo Bridge is the abode of immortals
You need not climb to the Jade City in heaven.

Later Pei Hang, who had continued his wanderings on horseback, stopped in his travels at the hostel at Indigo Bridge post station. Pei asked for a drink from an old woman who appeared to be in charge. She sent out a girl, Yunying (Cloud's Blossom), to give it to him. He was so struck by the girl's beauty that he could not proceed on his

journey. When he asked whether he could marry her the old woman said that an immortal had given her an elixir – ‘black frost’ – which, if she could eat it, she too would become an immortal but it could not be eaten until it had been ground up in a jade mortar and pestle for 100 days. If Pei could do this she would arrange his marriage to Yunying.

Pei sold his goods, horse and servants to purchase such a mortar and pestle. He ground by day and slept by night when the old woman took the mortar and pestle to an inner room. However the sound of grinding continued through the night. When Pei peeped into the inner room he saw a jade hare continuing the grinding.

The old woman collected the powder daily, and after 100 days had enough to eat. She then became an immortal and went to heaven asking Pei to stay at the hostel whilst wedding arrangements were put in place. Shortly afterwards a retinue of attendants and carriages came to take him to a great mansion in the mountains where he was married to Yunying. All of the guests, including the old lady, were immortals. One was introduced to him as Yunying’s elder sister. She turned out to be none other than Madam Fan! The old lady told him that he too would become an immortal because he was a descendent of Saint Pei, an ancient Daoist who was himself an immortal. Madam Fan’s family appear to have been associated with the Moon Goddess, Chang’e,¹ and this explains the last two lines.

The old woman then arranged for Pei and Yunying to live in the mountains in Jade Peak Cave. There Pei was provided with another immortality elixir named Rosy Snow and Jasper Flowers. After that he could transform himself at will into being an immortal. He and Yunying lived happily ever after.

Ma’s reference to Pei being a Jade Thief probably refers to his attempted seduction of Madam Fan. The phrase is a poetic reference to one who attempts illicit love.

Floating Cloud is a reference to Yunying.

1 See: pp. 128–9.